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Ostrich Eggs and Peacock Feathers: Sacred Objects as Cultural Exchange between Christianity and Islam[1]

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ABSTRACT *This article uses the wide dispersal of ostrich eggs and peacock feathers among the different cultural contexts of the Mediterranean – and beyond into the Indian Ocean world – to explore the nature and limits of cultural inheritance and exchange between Christianity and Islam. These avian materials previously possessed symbolic meaning and material value as early as the pre-dynastic period in Egypt, as well as amid the early cultures of Mesopotamia and Crete. The main early cultural associations of the eggs and feathers were with death/resurrection and kingship respectively, a symbolism that was passed on into early Christian and Muslim usage. Mercantile, religious and political links across the premodern Mediterranean meant that these items found parallel employment all around the Mediterranean littoral, and beyond it, in Arabia, South Asia and Africa. As an essay in the uses of material culture in mapping cultural exchange and charting the eclectic qualities of popular religiosity, the article provides a wide-ranging survey of the presence of these objects, from their visual appearance in Renaissance paintings to their hanging in the shrines of Indo-Muslim saints. A final section draws conclusions on the relationship between shared objects, cultural boundaries and the writing of history.*

Keywords: *Birds–ostriches*; *Birds–peacocks*; *Sacred objects*; *Trade*; *Material culture*

Introduction

Despite the growing recognition of an interwoven history tying many aspects of the Christian and Muslim Mediterranean together, the threads joining the religious, artistic and popular cultures of the region are sufficiently entangled to require further unravelling. The shared prophetic heritage of the two religions forms perhaps the most obvious aspect of commonality, as does the mutual debt of Islam and Christianity to the written culture of classical antiquity that stimulated so many

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intellectuals and savants in both traditions.[2] At times, as in 'Abbāsid Baghdad and Alfonsine Toledo, Christian and Muslim scholars worked together in their efforts to recover the intellectual inheritance of a past that they considered as their common patrimony. However, debts to and continuities from the past were by no means limited to the abstract world of intellectual exchange, nor to a shared lineage of prophets. Underlying all of these exchanges was the more basic fact of a shared geography that perpetually underwrote the nature and limits of Christian and Muslim contact, for better and worse. This shared geography expressed itself most obviously in a territorial manner. On the one hand, this was seen through the common piety of Muslims, Jews and Christians at the shrines of the prophets and saints in Syria, Palestine and Egypt and, on the other, through the equally long history of military competition for control of the Mediterranean littoral. This sense of the centrality of the sea is important, for it underlies the second level at which this shared geography operated, namely as an economic geography of trade that centred in large part on the Mediterranean and the ports that lined it, but which also expanded into the Indian Ocean.[3] It was this overlapping mercantile geography that was able to ramify the links between Christianity and Islam through the transport of goods far beyond the frontier of the Mediterranean. To exemplify this we need only think of the balance of trade that resulted in the presence of the lapis lazuli of Badakhshan in Venice and the passion for Venetian glass in Ṣafavid Isfahan. But if important, Venice and Isfahan were only two links in this network, while an emphasis on luxury goods for elite consumption, like the exchange of philosophical ideas and the texts that contained them, also unnecessarily limits the social frontiers of Christian and Muslim exchange.

If the nature and expense of premodern trade meant that items shipped from afar were invariably costly, this expense did not necessarily equate with a circumscribing of the social functions of the goods in question. The public display of ground lapis lazuli in Italian church paintings is itself an example of the ways in which the delights of a luxury trade item could be experienced by members of all social classes. In the same way, the presence in churches of other exotica imported from the Islamic world – particularly as lamps, vestments and relics – widened the social circulation of other traded goods. And here we are also reminded of an entirely different social dimension to the interchange between Christianity and Islam that lay beneath the long history of this luxury trade. For in terms of material goods, we need only consider the impact of European trade with Islam on the peasant diet of the Christian Mediterranean, which would be scarcely recognisable without the vermicelli and rice introduced from the east into the Italian and Spanish south. At the same time, the continued importance of olive oil in the economies of the Christian and Muslim Mediterranean shows the ongoing importance of the economic and cultural geography of the classical world for both its heirs.

[2]For a recent re-conceptualisation of the relationship, see R.W. Bulliet, *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

[3]See D. Abulafia, "The Impact of the Orient: Interactions Between East and West in the Medieval Mediterranean", in *Across the Mediterranean Frontiers: Trade, Politics and Religion, 650–1450*, ed. D.A. Agius and I.R. Netton (Turnhout: Brepols, 1997), pp. 1–40.

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Despite the attention given to luxury goods and the intellectual assets of high culture in mapping the contours of Christian and Muslim exchange, such mutuality and interchange also existed right down the social ladder. For beyond diet, and the influence of imported techniques and technologies on other aspects of peasant and artisan life, these exchanges were felt no less keenly in the realm of popular religiosity and popular culture more generally. This, however, remains a troubled domain for historians, for during the second half of the twentieth century the language and methods of nationalist folklorists and colonial ethnographers did much to discourage the study of such material.[4] Fortunately, a new generation of scholars has begun to realise the importance of popular religious practice as one of the principal arenas of cross-cultural exchange around the Mediterranean. This concerns not only the field of ritual spaces venerated by Christians and Muslims alike, but also the sharing of more opaque cultural practices, like the adoption of Islamic scapulimantic techniques by Christians in medieval Spain.[5] For if ideas, words and the texts that peddle them are by their nature disposed towards univocal meanings and unequivocal linguistic (and so cultural) attribution, ritual practice and the silent language of inert ritual objects inhabit a realm in which meaning is less tightly authorised, and in turn fastened to specific communities. To accede to this need not mean resurrecting the questionable principles of the school of symbolic anthropology that flourished during the 1960s and 1970s, but instead finding new ways to examine the ethnography and material culture of ritual and popular religiosity in societies composed of different religious groups or which have extended links with other cultural regions.

It is against this background that the present article explores the appearance and roles of two material objects in a variety of cultural contexts within Christian and Islamic milieux. In part, the article seeks simply to draw attention to an unusual and neglected aspect of Christian-Muslim exchange in which the common cultural heritage of antiquity and the cultural mediation of the medieval luxury trade played important roles. The article does this with reference to those most marvellous and mysterious products of the animal world that are ostrich eggs and peacock feathers. At the same time, by drawing attention to material objects as the focus of common interest and devotion in different religious contexts, the article hopes to suggest ways in which an impasse may be reached between the methodologies of comparative religion and what some might regard as more historically robust approaches to the study of religions. The article is also, then, an exercise in mapping religious boundaries through material culture, that is tracing the continuities and connections between geographically and chronologically divergent cultures through the presence of shared objects and similarities in the qualities attributed to them. For while the article focuses principally on the feathers and eggs as material (albeit, in different cases, sacred or luxurious) objects, we must remember that in each of the contexts that we examine the mute

[4]See E. Burke, "The sociology of Islam: The French tradition", in *Islamic Studies: A Tradition and its Problems*, ed. M.H. Kerr (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1980).

[5]See C. Burnett, "An Islamic divinatory technique in Medieval Spain", in *The Arab Influence in Medieval Europe*, eds. Dionisius A. Agius and Richard Hitchcock (Reading: Ithaca, 1997; first published 1994), pp. 100–135; J. Meri, *The Cult of the Saints Among Muslims and Jews in Medieval Syria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) and E.S. Wolper, "Khidr, Elwan Celebi and the conversion of sacred sanctuaries in Anatolia", *Muslim World*, 90, iii–iv (2000): 309–322.

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eloquence of these items was able to enmesh itself into local lifeworlds and the religious imagination that fuelled them.

Ostrich Eggs and Peacock Feathers in Antiquity

Given that in antiquity the ostrich was endemic to several regions bordering the southern and eastern Mediterranean lands, it is perhaps unsurprising that this oversized and flightless bird should have recurred in the mythologies of the region from the earliest periods. In early Mesopotamian creation myths, the ostrich was associated with the primordial female dragon Tiamat who was later slain by the sun god Marduk. In Egyptian mythology, the ostrich was primarily an emblem of Amenti, the goddess of the dead and the West, while the ostrich feather was an icon of Maat, the goddess of truth and justice. Subsequently, it was against an ostrich feather that the heart of man was weighed in the Egyptian version of the final judgement. In the ostrich's affiliation with the goddess Amenti and the donning of its feathers by the risen-god Osiris, we see an early association of the bird and its products with the representatives of death and resurrection. Such mythical traditions invariably found echoes in the material culture of their social contexts, and the feathers and eggs of the ostrich were prized objects in pharaonic Egypt. Several ostrich feather fans, set in golden handles, were found in the tomb of Tutankhamen (fl. *c.*1350 BC), the surrounding wall-paintings demonstrating their place in the ceremonial life of the pharaonic courts. Various Egyptian divinities were depicted wearing ostrich feathers upon their heads in recognition of their truthful and righteous qualities, while at the same time the decorative use of ostrich feathers as head-dresses reflected their desirability as luxury goods. A relief in the tomb of Meryre II at El Amarna thus depicts a group of Libyans offering ostrich eggs and feathers to the pharaoh Akhenaten.[6] A further reflection of this interdependence of mythological and material culture may be seen in the use of ostrich eggs as grave goods from the earliest period of Egyptian civilisation in the pre-dynastic and Old Kingdom eras.[7] Images of ostrich eggs also occurred in Egyptian funerary art and during the twilight of ancient Egyptian history a sculpture of an ostrich egg was placed at the centre of a bas-relief depicting mortuary rituals in the Ptolemaic catacombs of Alexandria.[8] Other artistic echoes of the symbolism of the ostrich also resounded during the Ptolemaic period, as in the case of small amulets carved from obsidian in the form of pairs of ostrich feathers. But in its funerary contexts, the ostrich egg itself had already taken on the associations that it would maintain in a variety of cultural contexts for several millennia.

Even in these earliest mythological and archaeological references to the ostrich, there is a clear association between the symbolism of the bird itself and its principal material by-products of feathers and eggs. In early Babylonian and Assyrian texts,

[6]See D. Conwell, "On ostrich eggs and Libyans", *Expedition*, 29, iii (1987): 25–34. See especially p. 31, Figure 12.

[7]On such items, see W. Needler, *Predynastic and Archaic Egypt in the Brooklyn Museum* (Brooklyn: The Museum, 1984), pp. 306–307 and P.T. Nicolson and I. Shaw (ed.), *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 332–333.

[8]Author's observation.

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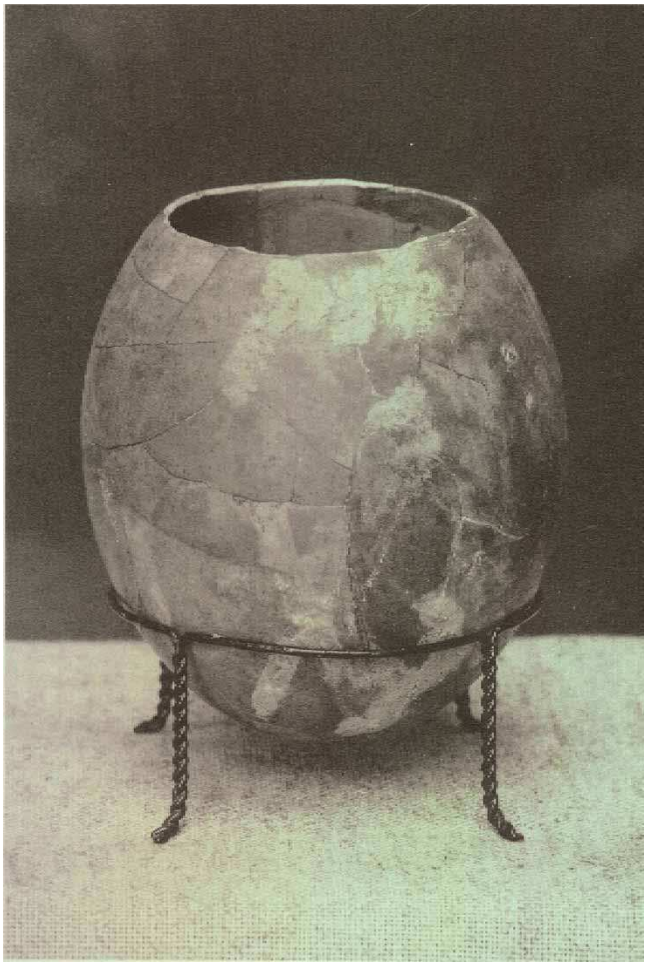

FIGURE 1. Ostrich egg cup from Kish, Mesopotamia, *c.*3000 BCE (from Laufer, 1926).

ostrich eggs were given medicinal and magical properties.[9] Luxury goods fashioned from ostrich eggs were also important in ancient Mesopotamia, where numerous different types of such objects have been found (Figure 1).[10] Such items featured as luxury items in early Mediterranean trade, with ostrich eggs fashioned into rhytons and cult vessels in Minoan Crete as well as throughout the later Aegean settlements. Often imitated in other materials, such eggs have been found in temple excavations and also played a role in the burial customs of Mycenae,

[9]See A. Finet, "L'Oeuf autruche", in *Studia Paulo Nasteri* [Orientalia Antiqua, 12], ed. J. Quaegebeur (Leuven: Peeters, 1982), p. 75.

[10]See B. Laufer, *Ostrich Egg-shell Cups of Mesopotamia and the Ostrich in Ancient and Modern Times* (Chicago: Field Museum of Natural History, 1926) and R. Moorey, *Ancient Mesopotamian Materials and Industries: The Archaeological Evidence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 127–128.

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Latium and Etruria.[11] These eggs were generally imported from Libya and Nubia, with the fittings attached to the finer examples being added in Crete. The excavations from the Uluburun shipwreck that have provided so much evidence on Late Bronze Age trade in the Mediterranean have shown that, along with other trade items, the ship was also transporting ostrich eggs.[12]

Ostrich eggs continued to be traded during the Greek and Roman eras, while the widespread featuring of the bird in mosaics in the southern and eastern Mediterranean well into the Byzantine period demonstrates the enduring fascination of the ostrich itself. Large eggs, whether genuine ostrich eggs or artificial ones wrought from precious metals, were a feature of numerous cults and the legends associated with them in classical antiquity. Probably the most famous of these was the legend and cult of the egg of the Dioskouroi. Associated in antiquity with the protection of the city of Sparta, a large silver egg was hung by ribbons from the ceiling of the city's temple to the celestial twins. Yet ostriches also themselves played important if poorly understood roles in other cultural contexts in the world of antiquity. Representations of the ostrich have been found alongside the better known images of ibex in early South Arabian temples, such as that of Kharibat Al 'Ali in Yemen, around which large numbers of ostrich egg fragments were also discovered.[13] Egg and rose motifs were later carved in large numbers in the tomb decoration of the peoples of the Syrian desert at Palmyra, while, in an early Indian Ocean reflection of the luxury trade in the Mediterranean, objects fashioned from decorated ostrich eggs have also been found in paleolithic settlements in northern India.[14]

No less than the ostrich, for thousands of years the peacock has also possessed associations with sacred personages, as well as supernatural qualities in its own right. In contrast to the ostrich, the peacock was endemic to India, and to some extent Persia, rather than Africa and Arabia. Yet its early presence in the cultural imagination of the peoples of the Mediterranean is similarly indicative of the co-identity of traded and sacred objects. In Egypt, the peacock was sometimes associated with paintings of the goddess Isis, while the bird's symbolism was also important in Achaemenid Persia (*c.*550–330 BC). In its sole registers in the Bible, the peacock appeared among the possessions of Solomon and was mentioned by Job.[15] However, the most abundant early references to the bird are found in myths associated with the Greek goddess Hera, to whom the peacock was sacred. A well-known myth related how the peacock acquired its characteristic feathers through Hera's transformation of the hundred-eyed giant Argus. The association of the bird with Hera, and subsequently with the Roman Juno, was reflected in the later Roman belief that the peacock bore the souls of empresses

[11]See O. Keller, *Die Antike Tierwelt*, volumes I–II (Leipzig: Engelmann, 1913), II: 168–169 and C. Renfrew, *The Archaeology of Cult: The Sanctuary at Phylakopi* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), p. 324.

[12]Conwell, 33.

[13]See R.B. Serjeant, *South Arabian Hunt* (London: Luzac, 1976), pp. 68–69. Since ostriches later appear in Arabic hunting almanacs from the region, Serjeant has argued that the remains may have been related to a disappeared ostrich-hunting cult.

[14]See G. Kumar, G. Narvare, and R.K. Pancholi, "Engraved ostrich egg shell objects: New evidence in Upper Paleolithic art in India", *Rock Art Research*, 5 (1988): 43–52.

[15]See 1 Kings, 10:22 and Job 39:13.

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to their apotheosis.[16] Due to legends associated with the incorruptibility of its flesh, the peacock was often carved on Roman tombs and funeral lamps as a symbol of immortality. This mixing of celestial, funerary and regal attributes would later be echoed in both the Christian and Islamic symbolism of the peacock and in the subsequent employment of its feathers.

Like the ostrich, the mythology and symbolism of the peacock overlapped with demand for trade items derived from it. The most important of these was the peacock feather fan or flywhisk. The history of such fans in the Mediterranean seems to be antedated by that of the ostrich feather fans portrayed in Egyptian bas-reliefs, which is understandable given the relative proximity of ostrich habitats. Nonetheless, it was within the same symbolic nexus of the fan that peacock feathers came to acquire social meaning. Like their Egyptian counterparts, Assyrian reliefs also portrayed rulers surrounded by fan bearers, as did images of the complex court ceremonial of the courts of the Achaemenids in Persia, who employed fans made of peacock feathers. The court ceremonial of these civilisations was later reflected in a variety of other courtly and religious contexts in both Christianity and Islam, not least in the iconography of hand gestures and the etiquette surrounding the royal throne.[17] It was for adopting such customs that Alexander the Great (356–323 BC) was criticised by his Macedonian followers, even though the peacock feather fan had been known as a luxury item in Greece for almost two centuries beforehand. Fans doffed by female slaves, beautiful boys or eunuchs were described by numerous Greek and Latin writers from Euripides (d. 406 BC) onwards. Greece's mercantile and other connections with Persia had resulted in numerous cultural influences in antiquity and the eastern origins of the fan were hinted at in claims that the Greeks learned to use the fan from the countries of the barbarians.[18] Such fans were often portrayed on Greek vases as being held by servants and the trade in them continued into the Roman period. In a reflection of their opulent imagery, the Roman writer Pausanias described the emperor Hadrian dedicating to Hera a gift of a golden peacock statue in Corinth.[19] Like its counterparts at the Persian courts, the Roman fan (*flabellum*) and flywhisk (*muscarium*) were not intended for direct use by their owners but were designed to be held by an attendant.[20] Roman historians also referred to the use of such fans in connection with the cult of emperor worship, the fanning of the imperial image during imperial funeral rituals prefiguring the links which the feather fan would later maintain with both courts and tombs in Muslim and Christian contexts.[21] In such ways, peacock feather fans were objects whose trade prompted the peoples of Persia and the Mediterranean into common behavioural forms, with their high price and subsequent status leading to

[16]See A.P. Kazhdan (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, volumes I–III (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), III: 1611–1612.

[17]On such symbols of kingship, see H.P. L'Orange, *Studies on the Iconography of Cosmic Kingship in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953).

[18]On such cultural contacts, see M.C. Miller, *Athens and Persia in the Fifth Century BC: A Study in Cultural Receptivity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[19]Pausanias, xvii, 6.

[20]See W. Smith, *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities* (London: John Murray, 1875), p. 539.

[21]See I. Gradel, *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), p. 286, note 40. I am grateful to the author for drawing my attention to this reference.

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the development of a parallel symbolism of royalty and authority wherever they were adopted.

Ostrich Eggs and Peacock Feathers in Christianity

In differing degree, many of these early uses of ostrich and peacock by-products were passed on to Christian and Islamic usage. But along with this material heritage, many aspects of learned and popular traditions concerning the natural world and its interaction with and meaning for the world of man were also transmitted to the common monotheistic heirs of antiquity. However, judging by the references to the ostrich in the Book of Job, the bird seems to have been viewed with rather less reverential eyes by the early Jews. According to Job, the ostrich "leaveth her eggs on the earth and warmeth them in the dust and forgetteth that the foot may crush them . . . she is hardened against her young ones".[22] But in a significant foreshadowing of the later Christian associations of the ostrich egg, these sole biblical references to it occur in a section of the Bible in which references to the womb and motherhood in general are prominent. Nonetheless, Job did present the bird as being forgetful and cruel, a reputation that may have evolved from a misinterpretation of the fact that ostriches leave their eggs untended for a sign of unconcern rather than as a means of hatching them by the heat of the sun. By the second century BCE, these early Jewish observations on the maternal habits of the ostrich were reinforced by the widespread belief that the ostrich hatched its eggs by intently staring at them rather than by brooding. Due to the prestige of the biblical scripture, these associations of the ostrich were to have a longstanding influence on the uses to which its by-products were put in a Christian context.

The ostrich's reputation for singular behaviour was later reiterated as other extraordinary qualities were ascribed to the bird by Roman and early Christian writers. In a reflection of the divine order of the cosmos, in Christian writings animals were widely regarded as signifying certain sins or virtues. This tradition of giving an allegorical interpretation to the behaviour of real and fabulous animals was one development of the earlier attempts to understand the natural world by Roman and Jewish writers. Pliny's (d. 79 AD) *Natural History* had claimed that the ostrich was capable of eating virtually any object, a belief echoed in such early Christian writings as the *Physiologus* (second to fourth century), which described the diet of the ostrich as including iron and glowing coal.[23] Some versions of the *Physiologus* also repeated the older notion that ostrich eggs were hatched through the power of the mother's gaze. The ostrich's image in the *Physiologus* and the subsequent bestiaries that drew on it had a great influence on the cultic associations of the ostrich in later Christian tradition. From the southern littoral of the Mediterranean, some of the material analogues to these beliefs concerning the natural world were reflected in the voluminous writings of St Augustine (d. 430 AD), beliefs that Augustine alternatively endorsed or reprobated. With his North African origins, it is perhaps also appropriate that it was Augustine who

[22]See Job 39:13–17, also Lamentations 4:3.

[23]This belief had a long life span and was later echoed in Shakespeare's *Henry VI, Part Two* (iv: x), where Jack Cade threatens to "make thee eat iron like an ostrich".

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condemned a later reflection of the Ptolemaic amulets depicting ostrich feathers that involved the talismanic use of rings made of ostrich bones in the curing of physical illnesses.[24]

Like many of the earlier customs that continued between classical antiquity and Christianity, the practice of associating ostrich eggs with sacred spaces was also one that was adopted by Christian practice in the Mediterranean. Reflecting the earlier decoration of certain Greek and Roman temples, the practice of hanging ostrich eggs from the ceilings of churches spread during late antiquity. Churches in the eastern and southern Mediterranean took earlier uses of ostrich eggs to new heights of decorative expression and such eggs featured in a variety of liturgical decorations, whether hanging freely from church ceilings or being used in the construction of elaborate church chandeliers.[25] The use of these eggs reflected the association of the ostrich with single-mindedness and concentration that had developed from the account of the ostrich staring at its eggs in the *Physiologus*. The position of the ostrich egg amid the cosmopolitan culture of the Mediterranean basin was later reflected in Egypt in the *al-Ǧawharat al-nafīsa* (the Precious Pearl) of the Syrian Orthodox Christian, Ibn Sabaʿ (fl.679/1280). Extant in its Arabic version, the *Pearl* describes the symbolic importance of hanging ostrich eggs in churches in terms of the concentration that is required of the ostrich to hatch its eggs, which if it falters for a moment will cause the chick to weaken and die before hatching.[26] The egg, then, was a symbolic stimulus towards concentrated prayer and devotion. At the same time, it was seen by congregations as a symbol of the Christian doctrine of resurrection. Such eggs were a feature of numerous Orthodox, Coptic and Assyrian churches in the eastern Mediterranean.[27] These included the monastery of St Catherine in Sinai, where at least sixteen eggs were hung in the nave of the church of St Catherine, with other eggs hanging in its additional chapels and one above the tomb of St Catherine herself.[28] Other encased ostrich eggs hang in the monastery church of St Antony in Egypt. However, we must be wary of describing such religious sites around the southern and eastern Mediterranean as uniquely Christian. Indeed, so regular was the visitation of Muslim pilgrims to St Catherine's that it led to the construction of a special hostel there for them. Ostrich eggs still hang in considerable numbers in churches in the eastern Mediterranean and in modern times numerous ostrich eggs have continued to hang in the crypt of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem just as they do in Muslim shrines in the same region.

In western Europe, the cultic usage of ostrich eggs had already become widespread by the thirteenth century, when the German theologian William Durandus (d. 1296) described them in the *Rationale Divinorum Officiorum*, his treatise on the symbolic meanings of the ceremonies of the church. Durandus

[24]See Augustine of Hippo, *On Christian Doctrine; The Enchiridion*, vol. 9, *The Works of Aurelius Augustine*, trans. M. Dods (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1873), Bk. ii, ch. 20, p. 56.

[25]See G. Galavaris, "Some aspects of symbolic use of lights in the Eastern Church: Candles, lamps and ostrich eggs", *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 4 (1978): 69–78.

[26]See Yuḥannā b. Abī Zakariyya Ibn Sabaʿ, "La Perle précieuse: traitant des sciences ecclésiastiques, trans. J. Périer, *Patrologia Orientalis,* 16 (1922): 753–755.

[27]See Galvaris, 76.

[28]See G.H. Forsyth and K. Weitzmann, *The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai: the Church and Fortress of Justinian*, volumes I–II (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965–73), I: plates 43, 57, 60, 85, 101. It is unclear whether the object hanging over the tomb is an ostrich or ceramic egg.

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described how pairs of ostrich eggs were often seen suspended in churches, whence they served to draw people to worship.[29] After repeating the traditions about the ostrich that we have seen earlier in the *Physiologus* and the bestiaries, Durandus declared that "the eggs of ostriches are hung in churches to signify that man, being left of God on account of his sins, if at length he be illuminated by the Divine Light, remembereth his faults and returneth to Him". This ecclesiastical role of ostrich eggs persisted long after the medieval period in European celebrations of Easter, and in the early eighteenth century the French aristocrat Jean Baptiste de Moléon reported chaplains at the church of Saint Maurice at Angers producing two silk-wrapped ostrich eggs from behind the altar on Easter day to process through the church chanting "Alleluia, resurrexit Dominus".[30] Since Easter eggs have not been attested in Europe prior to the fifteenth century, crusader or commercial links with the eastern and southern Mediterranean have often been seen to be behind the development of the custom in Europe.[31] The decoration of eggs at Easter was documented earlier in the southern Mediterranean, where in the early fourteenth century eggs were painted by both Egyptian Muslims and Christians on Maundy Thursday. The practice was sternly criticised by the Muslim reformer Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328).[32] Despite this theological opposition, we see here the combination of material objects and religious practice as the common ground between the overlapping cultural traditions of the Mediterranean.

Whether via the return of merchants or crusaders, the appearance of both the ostrich egg and Easter egg in Europe depended on the Mediterranean trade in which Byzantine and subsequently Italian merchants featured so prominently. For contemporary with the evolution of the role of eggs in the celebration of Easter during the great age of the Italian merchants come the most graphic representations of the ostrich egg in a European context. These occur in a series of Italian paintings of the quattrocento.[33] The most famous of these is the Montefeltro altarpiece, painted by Piero della Francesca (d. *c.*1492) around 1475 for the Urbino family mausoleum, that depicts the Virgin and Child neatly positioned beneath an ostrich egg that hangs from the ceiling above them (Figure 2). Several other ostrich eggs feature in paintings by Mantegna and Benaglio. These paintings included representations of both the individual hanging ostrich egg and the ostrich egg suspended in the middle of a lamp chain, both of which were present earlier in Byzantium. In a clear reflection of the fertile imagery of the egg, the subjects and patronage of the paintings also relate to childbirth. Since all of these paintings were altarpieces, their architectural contexts suggest a visual play between the architectural and decorative imagery of the paintings and the interior of the churches themselves. Nonetheless, echoing the use of ostrich eggs in other cultural

[29]See William Durandus, *The Symbolism of Churches and Church Ornaments: a Translation of the First Book of the Rationale Divinorum Officiorum*, trans. J.M. Neale and B. Webb (London: Gibbings, 1906), p. 62.
[30]See Jean Baptiste, Le Sieur de Moléon, *Voyages liturgiques de France* (Farnborough: Gregg, 1969 [1718]), p. 98.
[31]See editor's notes in Durandus (1906), p. 62 and A.W. Watts, *Easter: Its Story and Meaning* (New York: Henry Schuman, 1950), p. 29.
[32]See M.U. Memon, *Ibn Taimiya's Struggle Against Popular Religion* (The Hague: Mouton, 1976), p. 213.
[33]On the roles of the eggs in these paintings, see M. Meiss, "*Ovum Struthionis*: Symbol and Allusion in Piero della Francesca's Montefeltro Altarpiece", in *Studies in Art and Literature for Belle da Costa Greene*, ed. D. Miner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), pp. 105–129.

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FIGURE 2. Della Francesca's Montefeltro altarpiece.

milieux, visual depictions of the eggs in Italian churches also sometimes occurred in funerary contexts, as with the ostrich egg portrayed in the fourteenth century fresco above the tomb of Antonio dei Fissiraga in the church of San Franceso in Lodi.[34]

Far from being figments of their painters' imagination, such eggs are known to have been present in Italian churches of this period. The inventory of the Baptistery in Florence describes such an egg hanging above the altar of San Giovanni in the early fourteenth century.[35] Other ostrich eggs were the treasured possessions of numerous other churches during the early and late medieval period, frequently having been adapted for use as reliquaries. These included two mounted ostrich eggs that were famous enough to feature in one of the earliest printed pilgrimage

[34]See I. Ragusa, "The egg reopened", *The Art Bulletin*, 53, iv (1971): 435–443.
[35]Meiss, 94.

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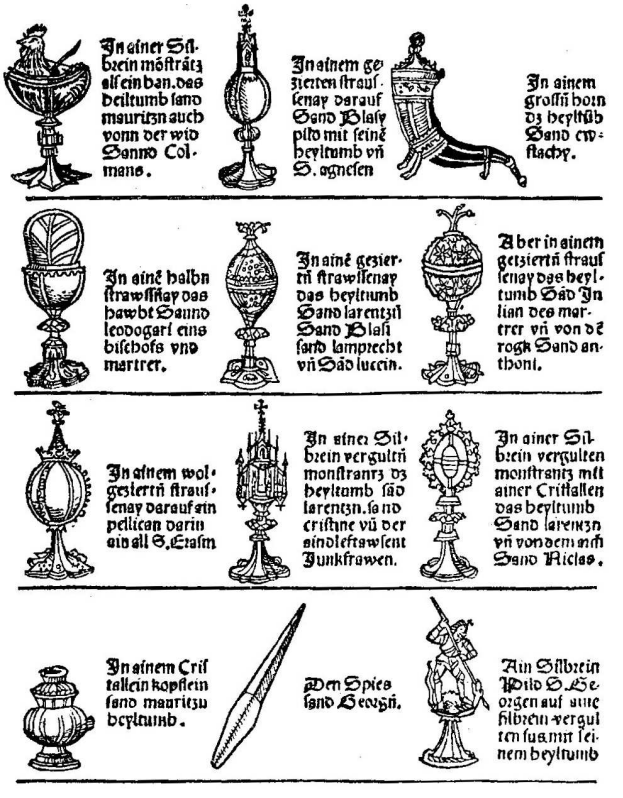

FIGURE 3. Printed ostrich egg reliquaries, 1502 (from Schlosser, 1908).

manuals, published in Vienna in 1502 (Figure 3).[36] The macabre northern Spanish sculpture of the *Cristo de Burgos*, dating probably from the sixteenth century and traditionally reckoned to have been made with human skin and hair, also includes three ostrich eggs at the foot of its crucifix.[37] Seven fourteenth century encased ostrich eggs also belonged to the church of St Servatius in Maastricht, though the earliest ostrich eggs known from such a context seem to be those donated to St Peters in Rome in the middle of the ninth century by Pope Leo IV (847–855), as recorded in the *Liber Pontificalis*.[38] These items were all part of the wider Mediterranean trade in luxury and exotic goods, many of which found their way into church treasuries. Perhaps the most stunning illustration of the place of the ostrich egg in this cultural exchange across the Mediterranean is found in Albrecht Dürer's (d. 1528) Uffizi *Adoration of the Magi* (1504), which,

[36]See J. Schlosser, *Kunst- und Wunderkammern der Spätrenaissance* (Leipzig: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1908), pp. 19–21, figure 8.

[37]During his journey through Spain in the 1840s, the French Romantic Théophile Gautier was characteristically fascinated by this statue. However, his celebrated gift for the interpretation of art objects faltered before the mysterious eggs – "a symbolic ornament of which the significance escapes me" – and he could only vaguely surmise that they might denote the Holy Trinity. See T. Gautier, *A Romantic in Spain*, trans. C.A. Phillips (Oxford: Signal Books, 2001), p. 45.

[38]Ragusa, 435 and 438.

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FIGURE 4. Dürer's *Adoration of the Magi* (Uffizi Museum, Florence).

appropriately, shows the Moorish king Balthasar presenting the infant Jesus with a gold-encrusted ostrich egg (Figure 4).

Despite their symbolic qualities, there was also a more functional purpose for the ostrich eggs that were hung in the middle of chains suspending lamps, for they proved to be efficient obstacles in preventing mice from climbing down the chains to drink the olive oil from the lamps. This practice continued into the modern period and nineteenth century visitors to the eastern Mediterranean left numerous descriptions of ostrich eggs serving this purpose in mosques as well as churches. One result of the popularity of ostrich eggs as church and mosque decorations was the development of ceramic eggs for the same purpose, some spherical and others more oval in shape. Like the use of the ostrich egg itself, the employment and production of ceramic eggs was inseparable from the world of Islam. While certainly serving a practical purpose, ceramic eggs were esteemed for their decorative qualities and were traded from different centres of production as widespread as Iznik and Cairo, which decorated them in their own distinctive styles.[39] In Anatolia, these ceramic eggs were popularly regarded as having practical benefits, not only as acoustic devices that helped amplify sermons but also as visible warning devices that would tremble at the onset of an earthquake.[40] Some of the

[39]Collections of these ceramic eggs are on display in the Coptic Museum and Museum for Islamic Art in Cairo and in the Benaki Museum in Athens.

[40]I am grateful to Omer Sam, who has helped revive the trade in Kütahya hanging eggs, for sharing this information with me.

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finest early examples of these ceramic eggs date from Mamlūk Cairo. Three were given by the senior Mamlūk officer Sirghitmish (d. 760/1358) to different religious institutions in Egypt, one egg bearing a Qur'ānic inscription and the other two displaying the name of the donor.[41] A number of fine spherical examples also survive from the same milieu, often inscribed with lengthy panegyrics to their donors.[42] Fine Iznik eggs produced for mosque lamps survive from the early sixteenth century, while by the eighteenth century the Armenian potters of neighbouring Kütahya were supplying highly ornamented versions of them to the entire Orthodox world.[43] Ceramic eggs and balls became popular pilgrimage gifts and those presented by Christian pilgrims at Jerusalem often also bore the names of their donors. Several such eggs and balls survive in the Armenian cathedral of St James in Jerusalem.[44] One of the eggs hangs above the altar there, while another ceramic egg is present at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. Many of these Kütahya eggs are decorated with depictions of the feathered wings of angels, and inscriptions in Armenian; one reads, "This sphere is in memory of the pilgrim Ĕstaban (Stephen)" and the date 1739. Other ceramic eggs survive in churches in the modern republic of Armenia.[45] While inscriptions might vary in terms of language and script, the basic pattern of presenting ceramic eggs to holy sites was shared between Muslims and Christians. To this day in Aleppo and Damascus, icons painted on plastic or wooden eggs are a common gift among Syrian Christians.[46]

A number of ostrich eggs have also been found in churches in Syria, just as they were placed in Muslim shrines in the same region. In the village of Sadad, to the east of Homs, at least two ostrich eggs on cords have been found in the eighteenth century Syrian Orthodox church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus, though as in the case of other examples it is difficult to ascertain their precise age.[47] Fragments of ostrich eggs have also been found in recent excavations around Deir Mar Elian al-Sharqi, a Syrian monastery which developed around the late antique or Byzantine shrine to Saint Julian of the East. Since the shell fragments were found alongside beads and pierced coins, it is possible that they served as bodily adornments, possibly related to the talismanic use of the portable ostrich egg described in other contexts below.[48] However, as in other cultic contexts in which ostrich eggs are found, the shrine to Saint Julian was also a pilgrimage centre for local Muslims, who knew the saint as Aḥmad Ḥawrī; in 1473–4, the local notable Sayf al-Dawla had an Arabic inscription carved in the cloister of the monastery.

[41]See G. Wiet, *Catalogue genéral du Musée Arabe du Caire: Lampes et bouteilles en verre émaillé* (Cairo: Imprimerie de l'Institut Français, 1929), p. 128.

[42]See G. Schmoranz, *Old Oriental Gilt and Enameled Glass Vessels* (London & Vienna: n.p., 1899).

[43]See S.S. Blair and J.M. Bloom (ed.), *Images of Paradise in Islamic Art* (Hanover: Hood Museum of Art/ Dartmouth College, 1991), p. 96.

[44]On these objects, see J. Carswell, *Kütahya Tiles and Pottery from the Armenian Cathedral of St James, Jerusalem*, volumes I–II (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), I: 85–86, 95–96, plates 24, 41.

[45]I am grateful to the perspicacious eye of Jen Whiskerd for this information.

[46]Emma Loosley, private communication.

[47]The eggs are currently found among a collection of liturgical objects in the former sacristy of the church. Further ostrich egg fragments have been found at the Syrian monastery of Deir Mar Musa. I am grateful to Emma Loosley for sharing her findings at Deir Mar Elian.

[48]The full details of these finds will be published in the forthcoming excavation report on the Deir Mar Elian Archaeological Project under the editorship of Emma Loosley.

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The context in which these eggs were found further demonstrates the porous nature of religious practice around the Mediterranean. Nonetheless, the exchange of such objects between religious groups was not always a smooth one, as the hagiography of the Ethiopian St George illustrates. The main account of the miracles of the Ethiopian St George describes a pilgrim visiting the tomb of a 'false prophet' in Arabia (i.e. Muḥammad), after which he became lost in the desert and was only rescued when he abandoned this prophet and implored St George to help him instead. On his return home, the pilgrim presented his local church in the small Upper Egyptian town of Beba with a clay vessel in the form of an ostrich egg that he had brought back from Mecca. Although the object was subsequently hung above the altar, it caused considerable local controversy due to its perceived 'Islamic' origins.[49] Yet even amid this dispute, we still see the common practice of hanging ostrich eggs and trading pilgrimage goods on both sides of the Muslim–Christian frontier.

Particularly close to the trade in ostrich eggs was that in rock crystal and glass lamps from the centres of superior workmanship in Syria and Iraq to the churches of Europe.[50] One crystal lamp, probably originating in tenth century Iraq, found its way into the basilica of St Mark in Venice, while another large imported crystal vessel was adapted for use as a relic chamber at the church of Luneburg in Saxony.[51] As sacred objects, over the centuries such reliquaries sometimes crossed between Christian and Islamic contexts, not least in the Venetian theft from Alexandria of the holy remains of St Mark himself. The presence of such imported objects in a European context, where the ostrich was a far more exotic and indeed quasi-mythological creature, reminds us not only of the long interchange between the cultures of the Mediterranean but also of the process by which foreign objects imported from the world of Islam became associated in a Christian context with the holy and miraculous.[52] In more secular destinations of the luxury trade, ostrich eggs later became prized by European collectors of exotica. One such egg was mounted above a variety of mythological figures on an embellished goblet made in sixteenth century Augsburg, while another egg, carved with hunting scenes and the Stuart coat of arms, formed part of the famous 'closett of rarities' assembled by

[49]This account is found in the modern Latin translation of the original text. See V. Arras (trans.), *Miraculorum S. Georgii Megalomartyris: Collectio Altera* (Louvain: L. Durbecq, 1953), pp. 3–5. On this text, see also *idem*, "La Collection éthiopienne des miracles de s. Georges", in *Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi Etiopici* (Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1960), pp. 273–284. On such cross-overs between Muslim and Christian shrines in Ethiopia, see R. Kriss and H. Kriss-Heinrich, *Volkskundliche Anteile in Kult und Legende Äthiopischer Heiliger* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1975), pp. 21, 48 and 60.

[50]See G.M. Crowfoot and D.B. Harden, "Early Byzantine and later glass lamps", *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 17 (1931): 196–208.

[51]See A. Shalem, "Fountains of lights: The meaning of Medieval Islamic rock crystal lamps", *Muqarnas*, 11 (1994): 1–11. On the symbolism of such lamps in an Islamic milieu, see A.S. Melikian-Chirvani, "The Light of the World", in *The Art of the Saljuqs in Iran and Anatolia*, ed. R. Hillenbrand (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 1994).

[52]See A. Angenendt, *Heilige und Reliquien: die Geschichte ihres Kultes vom frühen Christentum bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1994); M.M. Gauthier, *Highways of the Faith: Relics and Reliquaries from Jerusalem to Compostela* (London: Alpine Fine Arts, 1983); A. Shalem, *Islam Christianized: Islamic Portable Objects in the Medieval Church Treasuries of the Latin West* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1996).

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FIGURE 5. Loving cup, dated 1610, Exeter College, Oxford.

John Tradescant the Younger (1608–1662).[53] In a later echo of the Mycenean ostrich egg rhytons, a loving cup made from another mounted ostrich egg, inscribed with a date of 1610, made its way into the college silver of Exeter College, Oxford (Figure 5).

Like the ostrich, the peacock also proved a focus of attention for early Christian allegorists. From at least the Roman period dates the widespread belief that the peacock's flesh was incorruptible, and like the qualities attributed to the ostrich, the beliefs concerning the peacock's flesh spread into Christendom via the *Physiologus* and the later bestiaries. Augustine is once again a helpful source on such beliefs, having stated in his *City of God* that the flesh of the peacock was incapable of rotting.[54] Augustine also claimed to have conducted an experiment on a peacock served to him during his youth in Carthage, after which he could attest to the antiseptic qualities of the bird,

[53]Schlosser, fig. 50.
[54]See Augustine of Hippo, *City of God*, trans. H. Bettenson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), Bk. xxi, ch. 4, p. 968.

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for its flesh had remained fresh for a whole year after its death. Associated with such beliefs was the early Christian custom of laying peacock feathers on top of objects or bodies in the belief that they could prevent decay. Reflecting the place of the peacock in Roman funerary decoration, peacocks thus featured prominently in the decoration of the grave of the Cinque Santi in the catacomb of Callistus in Rome, as well as in Coptic tombs and Byzantine religious art.[55] In the Christian art of Byzantium and medieval Europe the peacock subsequently became a popular image of both immortality and the gardens of paradise.

However, it was during the early Christian period that the peacock feather's use in fans assumed a ceremonial role that would ultimately see the feathers transmogrified into the golden ritual fans of the high Byzantine church. The liturgical use of feathered fans in the Christian church was adopted from the earlier religious and court customs of Rome. The grand ceremonial fan (Greek *rhipidion*) had played a role in aristocratic and court life in Byzantium, but was also important in the western empire (Latin *flabellum*).[56] Its use soon spread into the ritual life of the early Church, and by the fourth century the prominent position of the *flabellum* before the altar, as described in the *Apostolic Constitutions*, indicated the scale of its infiltration into Christian worship (Figures 6 and 7). The *Constitutions* made specific reference to the use of peacock feathers for the *flabellum*.[57] The earliest surviving Christian liturgical fan is the sixth century *flabellum* that was found in the Syrian town of Stuma as part of the Kaper Karaon treasure, a fan which features peacock feathers spread around a silver disk portraying a seraph.[58] The symbolic association of peacock feathers with the wings of angels led to the belief that the waving of such liturgical fans resulted in an automated emission of prayers. This affinity between peacocks' and angels' feathers was also expressed in other artistic media, including paintings of angels with peacock feather wings. Stone carvings of peacock feathers with smaller images of *rhipidions* appearing within each feather featured in at least one church in Constantinople, underlining in a liturgical context the symbolic identification between the bird and the fan (Figure 8).[59]

The purpose of the ecclesiastical fan was twofold, with practical roles in whisking away flies from the sacrament (as a *muscarium*) and in fanning prelates (as a *flabellum*) and a symbolic role in communicating the authority of the holy sacrament

[55]See respectively H. Lother, *Der Pfau in der altchristlischen Kunst* (Leipzig: Dieterich, 1929), pp. 49–56 and 83; O.M. Dalton, *Byzantine Art and Archaeology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911), pp. 138, 142, 165, 170, 276, 346, 357, 374.

[56]On the *rhipidion*, see Kazhdan (1991), III: 1790–1791. On the *flabellum*, see "Flabellum", in the *Catholic Encyclopaedia* (New York: Robert Appleton, 1913), J. Braun, *Das christiche Altargerät* (Munich: M. Hueber, 1932), pp. 642–660; H. Leclercq, "Flabellum", in *Dictionnaire d'Archéologie Chrétienne et de Liturgie*, eds. F. Cabrol and H. Leclercq (Paris: Librairie Le Touzay et Ané, 1907–53), vol. 5, pt. 2. While the *flabellum* is still an important object in Greek Orthodox worship, its use was discontinued in the Catholic Church after Vatican II.

[57]See *Les Constitutions apostoliques*, trans. M. Metzger, volumes I–III (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1985–1987), III: 179.

[58]See Leclercq, columns 1623–1624.

[59]Byzantine spolia incorporating these images were excavated during repairs to the fifteenth century Mahmut Paşa mosque in Istanbul in 2000; the identity of the church to which they belonged is as yet unclear.

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Figure 6. Modern peacock feather *flabellum* (courtesy of Karl-Michael Soemer).

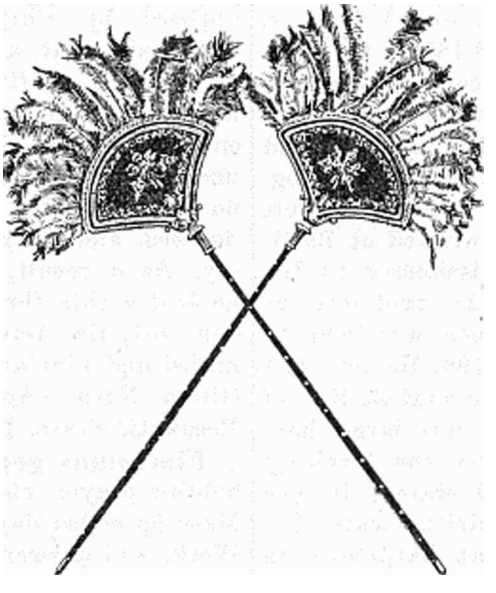

Figure 7. *Flabellum* (from *New Catholic Dictionary*, 1910).

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FIGURE 8. Byzantine church spolia with peacock feathers (courtesy of Prof. Robert Ousterhout).

and the priest in reflection of earlier court ceremonies.[60] However, during the early medieval period the fan had begun to reappear as a luxury item in secular contexts in Italy and then the rest of Europe from the twelfth century onwards.[61] An oriental fan is seen in an illuminated manuscript from this period depicting Louis VII of France being fanned on his sick bed, while another appeared slightly later in the painting of the birth of the Virgin in the *duomo* of Siena by Pietro Lorenzetti (fl. 1320–45).[62] The fan (and sometimes also the umbrella) came to be used as a mark of respect for medieval bishops and princes alike. The ancient royal imagery of the peacock feather also lingered in other ways in Christian tradition. This was seen in the exclusive right on ceremonial occasions of the governor of Rome, the auditor and treasurer of the Apostolic chamber and the chief steward of the papal household to ornament their horses with peacock feathers, lending them the name of the *prelati di fiocchetto*.[63] This usage had echoes in European heraldic devices with links to the heraldry of al-Andalus and more distant Muslim artistic and political centres, while the presence of a peacock feather in European coats of arms traditionally indicated participation in the crusades.[64] Over time, however, the feathered

[60]For a study of the most famous antique *flabellum*, see L.E.A. Eitner, *The Flabellum of Tournus* (New York: College Art Association of America, 1944). Drawing on the *Physiologus*, peacock images also featured on the handle of the Tournus *flabellum*. On Byzantine court ritual, see A. Cameron, "The construction of court ritual: The Byzantine *Book of Ceremonies*", in *Rituals of Royalty: Power and Ceremonial in Traditional Societies*, ed. D. Cannadine and S. Price (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 103–136.
[61]See H. Alexander, *Fans* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1984), p. 8.
[62]*Ibid*, 8.
[63]See "Majordomo", in the *Catholic Encyclopaedia*.
[64]See L.A. Mayer, *Saracenic Heraldry: A Survey* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), p. 20.

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fan was generally replaced by the versions in gold, silver and ivory that are still preserved in monasteries and museums, though the older peacock feather types remained, their silver handles often encrusted with precious stones. The use of the traditional peacock feather fan was widespread enough for there to have been one itemised in the possessions of St Paul's cathedral in London in 1295 and another at the abbey of Bury St Edmonds in 1429.[65]

Peacock-related objects also sometimes played a role in the royal exchange of gifts between Byzantine and Muslim rulers. While fans may not have been regarded as suitably expensive items for emperors to bestow (and may have been undiplomatically suggestive of servitude), the accounts of the Fāṭimid treasuries provided in the *Kitāb al-hadāyā wa l-tuḥaf* (Book of Gifts and Rarities) detail several silver and golden peacock objects, as well as gifts of living peacocks that were sent by Byzantine rulers to their Fāṭimid counterparts.[66] The Fāṭimid treasury also contained what the *Kitāb al-hadāyā* claimed to be the largest ostrich egg that ever existed, adorned in gold and given as a gift by an unspecified ruler to the grandfather of the Fāṭimid caliph al-Mustanṣir (427–487/1036–1094).[67] By the twelfth century commercial contacts with the world of Islam were also leading to the European adoption of the Arabic numerals and accounting methods that Italian merchants had observed from their counterparts in the southern Mediterranean. It was this prominence of Genoese and Venetian merchants that best explains the number of ostrich eggs and other Islamic objects we have seen in medieval Italy, for it seems likely that ostrich eggs were first introduced from the eastern Christian world to Christian Europe via the ports of Italy.[68] Unfortunately, the fourteenth century Florentine merchant Pegolotti made no mention of either ostrich eggs or feathers of any kind in the lists of goods described as available at the ports of the Islamic Mediterranean in his celebrated *Practica della Mercatura*, but this perhaps only confirms that the trade in these items was not on the scale of the other goods he described.[69] We do at least know that the later Venetian merchant Bartolomeo Viatis (d. 1644), who dealt in Levantine products on a large scale, counted ostrich feathers among his most successful imports.[70] It is amid this trade that we must locate both the ostrich eggs and peacock feathers, a trade whose commodities by their nature replicated ritual or social activity. Like the use of indigo in dying both the black robes and standards of the 'Abbāsids and the purple prestige cloths associated with the courts of renaissance Europe, ostrich

[65]Braun, 649.

[66]See G.H Qaddumi, *Book of Gifts and Rarities (Kitāb al-hadāyā wa' l-tuḥaf): Selections Compiled in the Fifteenth Century from an Eleventh-Century Manuscript on Gifts and Treasures* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 99, 110 and 238; see also Abulafia, 27–35.

[67]*Ibid.*, 240–241.

[68]See E. Ashtor, "Observations on the Venetian trade in the Levant in the XIVth century", *Journal of Economic History*, 5 (1976): 533–586; D. Howard, *Venice & the East: The Impact of the Islamic world on Venetian Architecture, 1100–1500* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

[69]See F. Balcucci Pegolotti, *La Pratica della Mercatura*, ed. A. Evans (Cambridge, MA: Mediaeval Academy of America, 1936); Abulafia, 27–35.

[70]See Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Phillip II* (London: Book Club Associates, 1992), p. 156.

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eggs in this way echoed the effects of the indigo trade on social practice in both east and west.[71]

Ostrich Eggs and Peacock Feathers in Islam

The cultic practices at the monastery of Deir Mar Elian and the imagery of the paintings of della Francesca (d. *c*. 1492) and Mantegna (d. 1506) show that, like other shared traditions, the hanging of ostrich eggs in sacred spaces was a custom common to Muslims and Christians. Like many elements of medieval Christian civilisation in Europe, the hanging of ostrich eggs seems to have been widespread in Islamic contexts in the eastern and southern Mediterranean before spreading from there to the north and west. An eastern Christian practice in this way fed into Islam before in turn being transmitted into Christian Europe, a process otherwise pictured as part of a Mediterranean cycle of recurrent cultural exchange. The early history of the ostrich egg in Islamic milieux is difficult to chart fully, though it seems likely that the eggs were adopted at an early period into Islamic religious architecture as a result both of the imitation of Byzantine practice and the presence of ostrich eggs in the original birthplace of Islam in the Hijaz.[72] Early Arabic linguistic usage possessed no fewer than fifty adjectives related to the ostrich and the imagery of the ostrich egg itself had a vivid presence in the religious imagination of the early Muslims, for the Qur'ān refers to God 'spreading out' (*daḥā*) the earth, using a term typically used for an ostrich laying its eggs.[73] The religious practices of Mecca in the time of Muḥammad included the annual hanging of ostrich eggs and other items in a special tree; this custom was referred to in the Ḥadīth and may have been related to the veneration of the sacred acacia of the pre-Islamic goddess al-'Uzza.[74] Numerous references to ostrich eggs also occur in the early *maghāzī* and *sīra* biographical literature on the Prophet Muḥammad, where their principal use seems to have been as drinking vessels, for the early prophetic biographer al-Waqīdī (d. 207/822) described Muḥammad drinking water from ostrich eggs while out hunting.[75] Such practical uses did not override the eggs' employment in more decorative or symbolic roles, for centuries later the North African traveller Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (d. 770/1368) found ostrich eggs still being used as water containers on his journey between Mecca and Jedda in 731/1330, by which time ostrich eggs had

[71]See K. Athamina, "The black banners and the socio-political significance of flags and slogans in Medieval Islam", *Arabica*, 36 (1989): 307–326; J. Balfour-Paul, *Indigo in the Arab World* (Richmond: Curzon, 1996). Indigo should not be confused with Roman imperial purple (purpura), which was a shellfish extract whose production was associated with Tyr and later with other centres in the Byzantine empire, from where the courtiers and churchmen of Europe were later supplied. After the fall of Byzantium, the supply of purpura was severely impeded, leading Pope Paul II in 1464 to sanction the use of dye from the Kermes insect for the dying of cardinals' and archbishops' vestments.

[72]See F. Viré, "Na'ām", in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, volumes I–XI (Leiden: Brill, 1960–2000), VII: 828–831. For a classic survey of the importance of Byzantine art on the development of Islamic architecture, see K.A.C. Creswell, *A Short Account of Early Muslim Architecture*, revised J.W. Allan (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1989).

[73]See Qur'ān 79:30.

[74]See J. Wellhausen, *Reste Arabischen Heidentums* (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1897; second edition), pp. 30 and 35.

[75]Cited in Serjeant, 109.

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Figure 9. Eggs as folk medicine: Marrakech, Morocco.

long been present in Muslim religious buildings and burial sites.[76] However, the association of the ostrich egg with the Prophet Muḥammad probably added to its aura of licit sanctity and this connection of the ostrich with the desert homelands of Islam was also echoed in its sub-identification with the camel, subsequently lending the bird its name of *shutar-murgh* ('camel-bird') in Persian, Turkish and Urdu.

Popular traditions are often shared across religious boundaries, forming regions of shared cultural practice that belie better established maps of cultural geography. It is in this sense that we should see the fact that ostrich eggs are associated with purity and the apotropaic ability to ward off evil all around the Mediterranean. In Anatolia, ostrich eggs were traditionally associated with a range of apotropaic qualities (particularly the ability to ward off spiders), while in Morocco ostrich eggs continue to be displayed today by traditional apothecaries, who prepare remedies for numerous ailments from their contents (Figure 9). Cures involving the carrying

[76]See Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *Travels in Asia and Africa*, trans. H.A.R. Gibb (Rawalpindi: Services Book Club, 1985), p. 105. For such an ostrich egg canteen with a leather harness from nineteenth/twentieth century Somalia, see Conwell, 28. An ostrich egg, incidentally, can contain over a litre of water.

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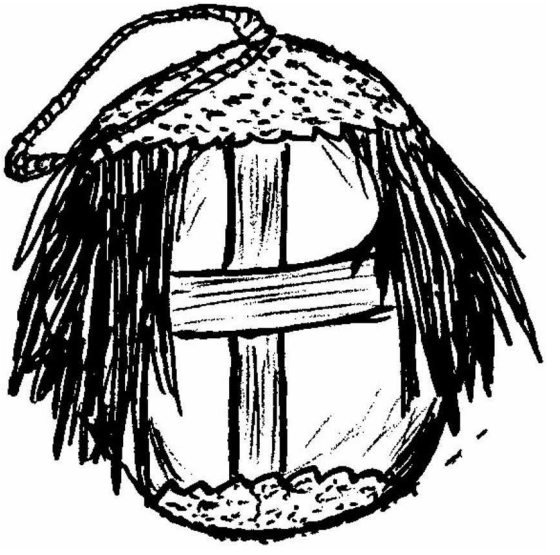

FIGURE 10. Libyan leather-clad talismanic egg (after Fodor, 1990).

of the ash of an ostrich egg were also a feature of the Talmud.[77] Eggs in general play an extremely important role in folk medicine all around the Mediterranean, and in Greece and Albania eggs were associated with the ability to ward off the evil eye, playing a particularly important role in childbirth ceremonies. These associations had a much wider resonance, and ostrich eggs mounted in silver, like those found in the shrines, or otherwise in leather were used as talismans against the evil eye right across the southern Mediterranean (Figure 10).[78] It was probably these same apotropaic qualities that resulted in ostrich eggs being fixed to the camel howdahs of beduin in the Syrian desert.[79] Talismanic eggs bearing Qur'ānic legends were still being attached to the external walls of houses in Cairo at the beginning of the twentieth century.[80]

Like Christianity, Islam was very much the heir to the earlier Greco-Roman civilisation of the Mediterranean and amid the large number of translations made from Greek into Arabic, it is unsurprising that certain interpretations of natural history passed into Islam as into Christianity.[81] In a similar manner to the medieval bestiaries of Europe, the ostrich was often used by Muslim writers as a symbol

[77]See W. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), p. 192, n. 46.

[78]For photographs of North African examples, see A. Fodor, "Amulets from the Islamic World", *The Arabist: Budapest Studies in Arabic*, 2 (1990): 11; J.F. Jereb, *Arts and Crafts of Morocco* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001), p. 37.

[79]This was reported near Palmyra in the mid-nineteenth century. See E.A. Beaufort, *Egyptian Sepulchres and Syrian Shrines* (London: Longman, Green, Longman and Roberts, 1861), p. 372.

[80]See W.L. Hildburgh, "Some Cairene amulets for houses and for horses and donkeys", *Man*, 13 (1913): 1–3.

[81]On translations, see R. Walzer, *Greek into Arabic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962). For early Islamic studies of natural history, see Abū Zayd al-Balkhī, *Le Livre de la création et de l'histoire*, volumes I–VI, trans. C. Huart (Paris: Leroux, 1899–1919); al-Damīrī, *Al-Damīrī's* Ḥayāt al-ḥayawān: *A Zoological Dictionary*, trans. A.S.J. Jayankar, volumes I–II (London: n.p., 1906–08).

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of supernatural power and was widely regarded as a creature of mystery in premodern Islam. Ostriches frequently cropped up in Arabic and Persian poetry, often by virtue of the ostrich's connection to the deserts of Arabia, the parnassus of classical Arabic poetry as well as the birthplace of Muslim religious literature.[82] While many Muslim writers were uncertain as to whether the ostrich was more closely related to the camel or to such great and fantastic birds as the *humā* and the *sīmurgh*, as in Christian Europe, the ostrich was also widely believed to nest on fiery coals.[83] Like the Bible before it, the Qur'ān had presented the natural world as a book of signs in which the assiduous believer could read messages penned by the creator, and the interpretation of symbols drawn from the natural world subsequently recurred regularly in later texts, not least in the popular manuals of dream interpretation (*ta'bīr*). In his classic treatise on the subject, Ibn Sīrīn (d. 110/728) described the ostrich as signifying a foreign or beduin woman, while a specifically male ostrich signified a friendly stranger.[84] In an interesting echo of the association of ostrich eggs with burial, Ibn Sīrīn interpreted dreams of eating egg-shells with the despoiling of a dead person, suggesting that the victim of such dreams might be a grave-robber by profession.[85]

While around the northern Mediterranean ostrich eggs were sufficiently rare to be the prized possessions of churches and collectors, around its southern littoral the bird's habitat was sufficiently close to render the eggs a more affordable and popular part of religious life. Literary references also suggest that ostriches were reared and farmed in some regions of the Islamic Near East.[86] While it is unclear whether it was ostrich eggs that Ibn Taymiyya had in mind when describing the celebration of Easter in medieval Cairo, it seems likely, given their abundance in other medieval Egyptian contexts, that such eggs would have numbered at least some of those painted there each year. Fittingly, some of the earliest available archaeological evidence of the use of ostrich eggs in an Islamic context comes from the excavations of the Mamlūk period cemeteries of the Egyptian Red Sea port of Quseir al-Qadim. Excavations have shown that as they had from the period of ancient Egypt and Mycenae, ostrich eggs played an important role in the burial customs of medieval Islam. The large number of ostrich eggs found at Quseir al-Qadim attests to the popularity of the practice, while their decoration affords further insight into the meanings attached to the eggs by their purchasers (Figure 11). Investigation of the inscriptions upon these eggs by Dionisius A. Agius has revealed Qur'ānic verses and poetry in mourning of the deceased.[87] Quseir al-Qadim's role as a port for the *ḥajj* and the inscription of poetry from the

[82]See R. Irwin, *Night and Horses and the Desert: The Penguin Anthology of Classical Arabic Literature* (London: Penguin, 1999), pp. ix–x; A. Schimmel, *A Two-Colored Brocade: The Imagery of Persian Poetry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), pp. 186–187.

[83]On avian symbolism in Islam, see A. Schimmel, *Deciphering the Signs of God: A Phenomenological Approach to Islam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), pp. 26–28.

[84]See Ibn Sīrīn, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. A. Bewley (London: Dār al-Taqwā, 1996), p. 100.

[85]*Idem*, p. 101.

[86]Viré, 828–831.

[87]The inscriptions and wider contexts of the Quseir al-Qadim eggs have been studied by Dionisius Agius. I am grateful to him for providing me with details, see his article, "'Leave your homeland in search of prosperity': The ostrich egg in a burial site at Quseir al-Qadim in the Mamluk period", in *Egypt and Syria in the Fatimid, Ayyubid and Mamluk Eras*, IV, eds. U. Vermeulen and J. Van Steenburgen (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), pp. 357–382.

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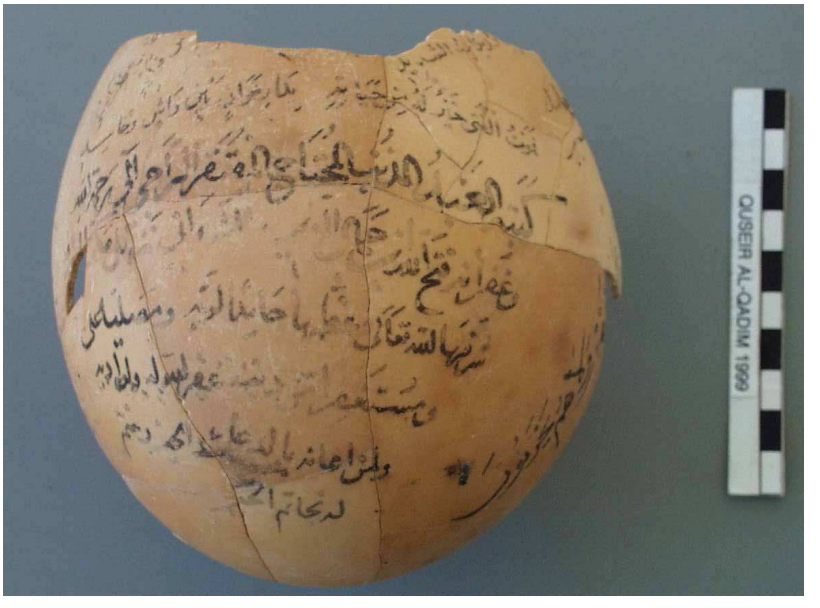

FIGURE 11. Inscribed egg from Quseir (courtesy of University of Southampton. See Anne Macklin, with a note on the ostrich egg by Dionisius Agius, "The Islamic town – Trench 1A", in *Myos Hormos – Quseir al-Qadim: Roman and Islamic Ports on the Red Sea*, eds. D. Peacock and L. Blue, volume 1 (Oxford: Oxbow, 2006), pp. 157–160).

riḥla (travel) genre on at least one egg[88] also hint at associations between the ostrich eggs and the Muslim holy land. The Quseir eggs provide an interesting parallel with the ceramic and glass eggs produced in Mamlūk Egypt, which were sometimes similarly replete with Qur'ānic and other inscriptions. Perhaps in a reflection of the availability and affordability of ostrich eggs in medieval Egypt, the association of the artificial eggs with the Mamlūk elite classes during this period suggests that the natural eggs were considered an inferior substitute to their artificial counterparts.

The association of the ostrich egg with Muslim burial was maintained long after the demise of the Mamlūks in Egypt. Echoing the role of the egg as a symbol of life and rebirth in the earlier burial practices of the Mediterranean, ostrich eggs became especially important through their prominence in the shrines of Muslim saints (*awliyā'*). Dating this development is problematic, since medieval Muslim pilgrims themselves generally seem not to have remarked on these objects, a silence which might alternatively attest to their being absent or commonplace. Nonetheless, the presence of ostrich eggs from at least the thirteenth century in the Quseir al-Qadim burial site and the wider legacy of antiquity that we have seen in the Mediterranean region at large suggests that the use of ostrich eggs in burial practices was adopted early in the history of Islam. From here the practice passed into the cult of the Muslim saints as it found architectural expression from the eleventh century onwards. Subsequently, ostrich eggs hung on chains have been seen over the tombs of Muslim saints in mausolea across the Near East.

[88]See Agius, 372.

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In practice, this usually meant hanging the eggs from the apex of a dome, though in simpler mausolea their chains were instead sometimes fixed to shrine walls or the enclosures surrounding the graves of saints. Although they are more often found in solitary examples, at other (usually major) shrines the eggs were placed in sets, their upper and lower surfaces often encased in silver, which served both as decoration and as a means of fixing them onto chains, as with examples found in Christian contexts. Unfortunately, the influence over the past century of Muslim reform movements with especial antipathy towards traditional forms of shrine pilgrimage has had considerable influence on the decoration of shrines and as a consequence it is increasingly difficult to gauge how common the practice was. However, surviving evidence suggests that the custom was extremely widespread, moving even into areas where the ostrich egg was otherwise effectively unknown.

European travellers later remarked on these ostrich eggs in their accounts of their voyages to the East. Ostrich eggs were associated with some of the most important shrines of Islamic tradition, so that the shrine of the Prophet's son-in-law 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (r. 35–40/656–661) at Najaf was described at the beginning of the nineteenth century as "richly ornamented with balls of ivory, glass, ostriches' eggs and a prodigious number of lamps".[89] Waxing lyrical on "their artful disposition, their splendour and their multitude", the British traveller Richard Chandler also praised the numerous ostrich eggs attached to the lamps of the Ottoman mosque at Manisa during his grand tour of 1764–65.[90] Another British traveller, Rev. Cunningham Geikie (1824–1906), observed several ostrich eggs hanging amid the Arabic invocations and copies of the Qur'ān beside the cenotaph of the prophet Abraham/Ībrāhīm at Hebron a century later.[91] A further egg hung over the tomb of Sarah/Sārā at the same site, while ostrich feathers were also present beside both cenotaphs.[92] The Hebron eggs reflect the presence of the group of ostrich eggs we have seen nearby at the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. Moreover, when Sulaymān the Magnificent (926–974/1520–1566) repaired and re-decorated the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem in the mid sixteenth century, a fine decorated ceramic ball from Iznik also featured in his pious efforts.[93] This shared visual repertoire reflected overlapping traditions of shrine pilgrimage in which Muslims, Christians and Jews visited one another's shrines more than a rigid process of imitation between discrete categories of cult.[94] In a reflection of these shared customs of pilgrimage, such mutually venerated and symbolically resonant objects as ostrich eggs were among the most suitable donations that different sorts of pilgrim might present to a shrine. Through pilgrimage and trade, objects in this way

[89]See J. Griffiths, *Travels in Europe, Asia Minor, and Arabia* (London: T. Cadell & W. Davies, 1805), p. 371.
[90]See R. Chandler, *Travels in Asia Minor, 1764–1765*, ed. E. Clay (London: British Museum, 1971), p. 210. While Chandler actually mistook the eggs for ivory balls, his modern editor also concurs that these were in fact ostrich eggs.
[91]See C. Geikie, *The Holy Land and the Bible: A Book of Scripture Illustrations Gathered in Palestine* (London: Cassell, 1887), I: 336.
[92]See A.B. Grimaldi, "Cenotaphs of the Hebrew Patriarchs", *Palestine Exploration Fund Quarterly Statement* (1912): 147 and 149.
[93]See J. Carswell, *Iznik Pottery* (London: British Museum Press, 1998), pp. 63–68. The original dedication on the lamp, dated 1549, was to Ashrāfzāda Rūmī, a local Ṣūfī saint of Iznik. Many such spheres hang in Sulayman's Mausoleum in Istanbul.
[94]On such overlapping patterns of pilgrimage, see T. Canaan, *Mohammedan Saints and Sanctuaries in Palestine* (London: Luzac & Co, 1927) and Meri (2002).

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mediated between religious groups, crossing boundaries in a way that texts and dogma often found impossible.

As we have noted, it is extremely difficult to date the appearance of these eggs in different shrines. But like the many shrines associated with biblical and Qur'ānic figures in the East that were extended or embellished by Muslim rulers during the era of the crusades, the tomb of Abraham/Ībrāhīm at Hebron was ornamented with large silver gates in the last year of Ayyūbid power in 658/1259.[95] Whether or not the ostrich eggs later recorded there pre- or post-dated this redecoration, other examples of old ostrich eggs were still present in numerous Muslim shrines in the Near East during the twentieth century. Along with other shrines, in Egypt ostrich eggs featured in the mausolea of Abū' l-Ḥajjāj in Luxor, Khalīl al-Rabaṭ in Asyut, Abū Zanīma in Sinai and Shaykh Barghut in Port Sudan.[96] In Syria they were present in the shrines of Umm Kalthum in Damascus and Shaykh 'Anbar in Hama, as well as at Maqām Ibrāhīm to the south of Aleppo and other sites in the region.[97] Ostrich eggs were also placed in numerous Ottoman mosques and shrines (*türbes*), as well as town gateways.[98] In an appropriate reflection of the occasional overlapping of Christian and Muslim forms of devotion in the Mediterranean, until the nineteenth century ostrich eggs formed part of the chandeliers of Hagia Sophia/Aya Sofia in Istanbul, where according to one eighteenth century traveller there hung from the central dome "innumerable lamps of coloured glass, intermixed with globes of crystal, ostrich eggs, and ornaments of gold and silver".[99] In the early twentieth century, amid French colonial plans to establish ostrich farms in Algeria, ostrich eggs were also seen hanging in Algerian mosques, particularly that of Sīdī Aḥmad bin Yūsuf at Miliana.[100] Other ostrich eggs have been seen by the present author in buildings in the Hadramaut region of Yemen, though despite extensive investigation no eggs have been located in shrines in Iran. Despite this, nineteenth century photographs do seem to indicate the presence of either ostrich or ceramic eggs in Muslim shrines in Central Asia.[101] In a slightly different context, ostrich eggs are still found boldly positioned on the top of mosque minarets right across the African Sahel; the mud-brick mosque at Djenne in Mali is the most famous example. This custom was reflected in the formerly widespread practice of placing sets of ostrich eggs upon the points of the crosses that dominate the rooftops of Ethiopian churches.[102] In both cases, the egg acted as a visual signifier of sacred space. Given the relative

[95]See Y. Frenkel, "Baybars and the Sacred Geography of *Bilād al-Shām*: A Chapter in the Islamization of Syria's Landscape", *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 25 (2001): 153–170; Y. Tabbaa, *Constructions of Power and Piety in Medieval Aleppo* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1997).

[96]See R. Kriss and H. Kriss-Heinrich, *Volksglaube im Bereich des Islam*, volumes I–II (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1960–62), I: 88, 120, 123, 136 and figure 69.

[97]See Kriss and Kriss-Heinrich, I: 229 and 283. I am grateful to Yasser Tabbaa for informing me about the eggs at Maqam Ibrahim.

[98]See F.W. Hasluck, *Christianity and Islam under the Sultans*, volumes I–II (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929), I: 232–233.

[99]See J. Dallaway, *Constantinople Ancient and Modern* (London: T. Bensley, 1797), p. 57.

[100]See L. Montière, "L'élevage de l'autruche et les indigènes algériens", *Révue du monde musulman,* 6, ix (1908): 130–135, especially p. 131.

[101]Rau Collection (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford), 8.2 and 27.5.

[102]See T. Insoll, *The Archaeology of Islam* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 42–43 and Kriss and Kriss-Heinrich (1975), pp. 21, 48 and 60.

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abundance of the ostrich in parts of Africa, it is perhaps unsurprising that ostrich eggs have also been observed in numerous domestic contexts in such East African Muslim settings as Zanzibar, where they were hung on the verandas of shops and houses to ward off bad luck.[103] However, in a reflection of the role which South Asia has played in preserving many aspects of traditional Islamic piety, the largest quantities of surviving ostrich eggs today hang on the other side of the Indian Ocean in the Muslim shrines of India and Pakistan.

As *ḥalāl* without washing or special preparation, the egg is considered an especially pure food in Islam, an attitude reflected in South Asia in the popular association of ostrich eggs with purity (Urdu *pākīzigī*). Like the association of the eggs with both the life of Muḥammad and the resurrection of Christ, such associations provide insight into the ways in which certain objects are deemed free of the 'pagan' associations that have been regularly attributed to other objects of sanctity in both Christian and Islamic contexts. As such, as in the Near East, the egg was regarded as fit to be displayed above the tombs of the Muslim saints (Figure 12). Located far from the habitats of ostriches in the modern or medieval period, the abundance of ostrich eggs in the Muslim shrines of South Asia demonstrates their significance to the people who transported them from afar. It seems likely that the journey of the eggs to South Asia occurred in two overlapping ways. With the long history of contact between western India and the Arab trading posts of East Africa, many eggs probably arrived with other merchandise directly from East Africa. However, ostriches also survived in the deserts of the Arabian peninsular until the early twentieth century, from where we have seen them first entering the cultural imagination of Islam.[104] Bearing in mind this association with the Muslim holy land, it seems likely that many eggs were purchased as pilgrimage souvenirs in Arabia and brought to South Asia with the returning *ḥajj* traffic. While the Wahhabis destroyed the shrines of the Hijaz itself during the early nineteenth century, the fact that shrines in Yemen that lay beyond the reach of the followers of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb continue to feature ostrich eggs suggests that earlier pilgrims may have observed eggs in saintly mausolea in the Hijaz itself, so providing a model for pious imitation.[105] The story preserved in the Ethiopian tradition of St George describing a pilgrim buying an ostrich egg in Mecca further suggests the place of Mecca in the ostrich egg trade. However, given the greater abundance of ostriches in Africa, it seems likely that many eggs would ultimately have been of African origin, and have been traded on in stages both northwards into the Mediterranean world and eastwards into Arabia and the Indian Ocean. The association of ostrich eggs with distant lands overseas is reminiscent of

[103]In southern Africa, where the ostrich was naturally abundant, the eggs also became popular as grave goods among the San and !Kung peoples. However, except as trade items, the eggs' most important indigenous function was as raw material for beads. See J. Mack (ed.), *African Art and Cultures* (London: British Museum Press, 2000), pp. 180–181 and T. Phillips (ed), *Africa: The Art of a Continent* (New York: Prestel, 1995), pp. 60, 79 and 193.

[104]The Arabian ostrich (*struthia camelus syriacus*) was virtually hunted to extinction by the end of the nineteenth century due to the European demand for ostrich feather boas. The last reported sightings were in 1949 in northern Arabia and in 1966 in Jordan.

[105]Unfortunately, the shrines of the Hijaz had already been destroyed before the arrival of such nineteenth century European travellers to the region as Burkhardt and Burton, though travellers to the Near East regularly reported ostrich eggs as among the chief items which local traders had among their wares. See e.g. Beaufort, 38.

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FIGURE 12. Eggs hanging above tombs of saints, India.

the *cocos de mer* that were once regularly washed up on the coasts of South Asia from their origins in the Maldives and used as the traditional and mysterious material for dervish begging-bowls (*kashkūls*).[106] Whatever their precise origin, ostrich eggs continue to hang in hundreds of Muslim shrines in modern India and Pakistan. In many cases, they hang in groups of several eggs connected on a single chain: no fewer than nine ostrich eggs hang above the grave of the Ṣūfī saint Zayn al-Dīn Shīrāzī (d. 1369) in Khuldabad in Maharashtra, at whose shrine the Mughal emperor Awrangzēb (d. 1119/1707) is also buried. While many modern-day devotees matter-of-factly describe the eggs as belonging to ostriches (*shotar-murgh*), more traditional associations also remain in places. Reflecting the old European association of ostrich eggs with dragons and griffins, the belief that the eggs belong to such mythical birds as the *shāh-murgh* or *rukh* may still occasionally be encountered today.[107]

[106]Examples of such begging bowls are found in J.W. Frembgen, *Kleidung und Ausrüstung islamischer Gottsucher: Ein Beitrag zur materiellen Kultur des Derwischenwesens* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1999), pp. 57–101.

[107]This was evidenced in the author's interviews with visitors to the shrine of Shāh Musāfir in Aurangabad, Maharashtra (31.10.99 and 2.11.99). *Rukh* is the original form of the 'roc' familiar to readers of European versions of the stories of Sindbad.

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As in the case of the ostrich, the importance of the peacock in Islamic milieux was not merely in providing an image for artistic imitation, but also in providing material objects for artistic manipulation. Once again, this meant overwhelmingly the use of its feathers. Like the use of the eggs and feathers of the ostrich, this emphasis on the external body of the bird is interesting, for though the meat of both birds was considered licit (*ḥalāl*) in Islamic law it seems rarely to have been eaten.[108] This may be suggestive of an underlying reverence for both birds, begging the question of whether the use of its by-products caused or was caused by this unspoken taboo. In this respect it is significant that the killing of an ostrich or the breaking of one of its eggs was expressly forbidden during the *ḥajj*.[109] However, the peacock also had a rich symbolic repertoire in Islam. As in the Christian world, where the peacock could be read as a symbol of pride or immortality, the symbolism of the peacock had a dual capability in Islam. The overlapping nature of the Christian and Muslim traditions concerning the natural world is best seen in the adoption of the Greek name for the peacock into the Arabic as ṭāwūs. As in Christian contexts, contrasts were often drawn by Muslim writers between the splendour of the peacock's feathers and the ugliness of its feet and cry. These negative associations were connected to the role of the bird in popular and literary Muslim traditions of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the earthly paradise. Particularly widespread was the tradition of the peacock's defeat and subsequent swallowing of Satan (Shayṭān, Iblīs) in the form of a snake, and its accidental carrying of Satan thereafter in its belly into the garden of Eden. This tradition reflected the widespread folk reputation of the peacock as the enemy of the snake. The ambivalent quality of the peacock was also reflected in the medieval Arabic nickname for Satan as the 'peacock angel' (Malik Ṭāwūs).[110] These traditions also found their way into the evolution of the Yazidi 'devil worshipping' faith among the Kurds of Iraq and northern Syria, where the name Malik Ṭāwūs was used as part of a soteriology based on the story of Satan and the peacock.[111] Until recent decades, the Yazīdīs also painted murals of peacocks beside the entrances to their houses, while bronze or iron statues of peacocks known as *sanjāqs* ('standards') have long played a central role in Yazidi ritual (Figure 13).[112] The exchange of painted hens' eggs was also an important part of Yazidi festivals, with the eggs also being placed on the graves of the dead.[113]

The feathers of the peacock were well-known for their medicinal uses and featured in numerous popular beliefs and customs, including their use as bookmarks for the Qur'ān. For like the ostrich egg, in Islam the peacock was

[108]Peacock flesh did, however, feature in the imaginary dish served in paradise that was created in a satire by the Arabic poet, al-Ma'arrī (d. 450/1058). See G.J. van Gelder, *God's Banquet: Food in Classical Arabic Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 87. Nonetheless, in India during the nineteenth century roasted peacock was served fairly regularly on British tables.

[109]See Viré, 828–831.

[110]See E.W. Lane, *Arabian Society in the Middle Ages* (London: Curzon, 1987), p. 31.

[111]On Malik Ṭāwūs, see G. Asatrian and V. Arakelova, "Malak-Ṭāwūs: the Peacock Angel of the Yezidis", *Iran and the Caucasus*, 7 (2003).

[112]I am grateful to Clifford Denham for informing me of the murals he saw during the 1970s in Yazidi villages in north-eastern Syria. On the use of *sanjāqs*, see R.H.W. Empson, *The Cult of the Peacock Angel* (London: H.F. & G. Witherby, 1928).

[113]See E.S. Drower, *Peacock Angel: Being Some Account of Votaries of a Secret Cult and Their Sanctuaries* (London: J. Murray, 1941), p. 98.

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FIGURE 13. Yazidi *sanjāq* (from A.H. Layard, *Nineveh and its Remains: with an account of a visit to the Chaldæan Christians of Kurdistan, and the Yezidis, or devil-worshippers*, London: John Murray, 1849).

also associated with purity through the belief that it mated asexually, with the peahen becoming impregnated through drinking the tears shed by her suitor during their dance of courtship.[114] These peacock legends were immensely widespread in the different cultural expressions of medieval Islam.[115] The *Kitāb al-ḥayawān* (The Book of Animals) of the 'Abbāsid *litterateur* al-Jāḥiz (d. 254/868) featured the peacock extensively. Reflecting the apotropaic uses of its feathers, Arabic naturalists generally agreed on the peacock's ability to kill snakes and detect poisoned dishes, while also detailing a host of medicinal uses for its flesh, bones and feathers. The bird also featured in later poetic works, particularly among such Persian poets as Niẓāmī (d. 606/1209) and Sanā'ī (d. 547/1152). However, it was in Ṣūfī writings that the peacock received greatest attention, where its symbolism was drawn on extensively in the allegorical Persian writings of al-Suhrawardī (d. 588/1192), 'Aṭṭār (d. *c*.618/1221) and al-Rūmī (d. 672/1273).[116] The Persian Ṣūfī 'Azīz al-Nasafī (d. before 700/1300) interpreted the story of the peacock and Adam's expulsion from paradise as a spiritual allegory, in which Adam and Eve represented the soul and the body, Satan the faculty of imagination (*wahm*), the snake violence (*ghaṣb*) and the peacock man's sensual desire (*shahwāt*).[117] In northern India five centuries later the sensual imagery of the peacock was lent further poetic immortality in the Urdu *Mōrnāma* (Book of the Peacock) of Mīr Taqī Mīr (d. 1225/1810).

Just as the ostrich and its oversized eggs were sometimes associated with legendary birds, so was the imagery of such mythical birds also adopted by

[114]On these and other traditions of the peacock, see P.T. Nair, *The Peacock: The National Bird of India* (Calcutta: Firma, 1977).

[115]See F. Viré and E. Baer, "Ṭāwūs", in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, volumes I–XI (Leiden: Brill, 1960–2000; second edition).

[116]On this tradition among the sufis more generally, see P. Awn, *Satan's Tragedy and Redemption: Iblis in Sufi Psychology* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1983), pp. 42–43.

[117]See 'Azīz Nasāfī, *Majmū'a-e-rasā'il-e-mashhūr ba Kitāb al-insān al-kāmil*, ed. M. Molé (Tehran: Qismat-e-Īrānshināsī-ye-Institū-ye-Īrān va Farānsa, 1962), chapters 17, 22 [Persian].

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Ṣūfī writers like the aforementioned al-Suhrawardī and ʻAṭṭār. The symbolism of such mythical birds had a long and complex history in Islam, drawing in large part upon the heritage of such fantastic birds as the *humā* and *ʻanqā* of pre-Islamic Iran.[118] The imagery of these creatures long remained part of the cultural and visual vocabulary of Islam. When the Mughal emperor Humāyūn sought refuge at the court of the Safavids during the 1540s, he pronounced the memorable verses, "All the princes seek the *humā*'s shadow,/ Behold this Humā [i.e. Humāyūn himself] who enters under your shadow".[119] Similarly, when the Afghan ruler Aḥmad Shāh Durānī (1160–1187/1747–1773) was enthroned in his kingdom, a tradition developed among the North Indian Rohila kingdoms that the ever-flying *humā* bird had passed its shadow over his head, so predicting the royal destiny of his lineage.[120] These traditions reflected a more widespread continuation of pre-Islamic Persian beliefs about the destiny and divine ordination of kings.

However, the iconography of both the peacock and these more fantastic birds at times crossed together from Islam into the European imagination through the medium of trade items. Harpies with peacock tails appeared upon medieval ivories carved in Sicily, while the rich embroidered regal mantle that was imported from Almoravid Almeria to become, as the supposed chasuble of St Thomas à Becket (d. 1170), one of the most important cult relics of the medieval church also bore sphinxes with peacock tails, rampant harpies and ordinary peacocks in abundance. In view of these cultural exchanges, the resting place of this relic in the cathedral of the Italian town of Fermo was a fitting one, for in addition to possessing an eleventh century Fāṭimid rock crystal vessel in its reliquary, the paleo-Christian crypt of Fermo's cathedral also possessed a fifth century mosaic depicting a pair of peacocks.[121] The same processes were reflected in the common presence of other animal-derived objects in the shrines of Muslim and Christian saints, sacred objects whose veneration sometimes predated the adoption of either religion. In an Islamic context the most important examples are the ibex and other animal horns found attached to the outside corners of shrines as far apart as the *wādīs* of Yemen and the mountain villages of the Pamir.[122] Less common and more localised examples included the swordfish swords kept in Muslim shrines in East Africa and Yemen that were embraced fortnightly as a prophylactic against infertility and mortal danger.[123] As with the ostrich eggs, examples of such wondrous imported plunder from the natural world were also displayed around the saintly shrines of Christian Europe. Here, pilgrimage contact with the shrines of the Christian saints of Egypt and Palestine contributed to the similarities between the objects displayed in the

[118]See E. Baer, *Sphinxes and Harpies in Medieval Islamic Art: An Iconographical Study* (Jerusalem: Israel Oriental Society, 1965), pp. 20–28; M. Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, vol. 1, *The Early Period* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1989), pp. 88–90.

[119]See Schimmel, *Two-Colored Brocade*, 187–189.

[120]See J.J.L. Gommans, *The Rise of the Indo-Afghan Empire, c. 1710–1780* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 50.

[121]See D.S. Rice, "The Fermo Chasuble of St Thomas-a-Beckett", *Illustrated London News* (October 3rd 1959): 356–357.

[122]The classic if methodologically redundant studies of this phenomenon are E.A. Westermarck, *Pagan Survivals in Mohammedan Civilization* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1933); S.M. Zwemer, *The Influence of Animism on Islam: An Account of Popular Superstitions* (London: SPCK, 1920). The most comprehensive modern study remains Kriss and Kriss-Heinrich, *Volksglaube*.

[123]Serjeant, 97.

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Muslim and Christian shrines of the southern and eastern Mediterranean and those of Europe.[124] Yet in both cultural contexts, these objects were metamorphosed in the local imagination into the relics of such mythical creatures as sphinxes and harpies, the hybrid monsters of ancient Persia and Egypt popularised around the Christian Mediterranean through the importing of fabrics, ceramics and tall tales alike. In both Christian and Islamic milieux, ostrich eggs and peacock feathers therefore served as an interface between the world of nature and the far less naturalistic realm of the human imagination.

Drawing upon the same antique customs of the Mediterranean and Persia that had been also transmitted to Christianity, both ostrich and peacock feathers were used as an important part of luxury headdress by Muslim elites. Reflecting the regal associations of the peacock feather in the Christian world, in Islamic contexts the feathers became an important aspect of court dress. Such elaborate customs probably entered the Islamic world along with the adoption of a variety of other Persian royal traditions during the early ʻAbbāsid period, but in subsequent centuries were found right across Islam. Peacock feathers played a prominent role in the descriptions penned by Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (d. 770/1368) of the court of the Delhi Sultans, where amid the complex etiquette of state, the sultan's principal *naqīb* carried a gold mace and wore a jewelled golden tiara surmounted with peacock feathers.[125] In Central Asia Ibn Baṭṭūṭa also recorded royal Üzbek women wearing a conical headdress encrusted with pearls and similarly surmounted with peacock feathers.[126] Such stately hats frequently appear in paintings from the Islamic world and in the Ṣafavid *Shāhnāma* copied in 1524 by the great calligrapher Muḥammad al-Harawī in Tabriz, Alexander/Sikandar is shown wearing the plume of a peacock in his headgear.[127] Turkish miniatures for their part also demonstrate the importance of peacock feather headdress to the Ottoman sultans, whose feathered crowns played an important role in Ottoman burial ceremonies by symbolising the absent ruler.[128] In such contexts, peacock feathers acted as visual metaphors for the Persian royal traditions that later rulers imitated; unsurprisingly, the peacock was also often linked with Iranian rulers in Persian miniature paintings. In similar vein, the dream interpreter al-Maqdīsī interpreted the peacock as signifying a Persian king.[129] Like the role of *flabella* in the Byzantine court and church, the imagery of the peacock's feathers could thus be used to connect later authorities and institutions to the legitimacy and grandeur of an earlier imperial age.

However, feathered headdress was not the only antique ceremonial tradition that Muslims inherited, for like their Christian counterparts they too adopted the royal symbolism of fan and flywhisk. As in Christian contexts, the use of these items was paralleled in religious and courtly ceremony, for during the medieval period an uncertain equilibrium (and so erstwhile competition) between religious and political authority was a characteristic of both civilisations. Like feathered

[124]On such cross-overs between Muslim and Christian shrines in Egypt and Ethiopia, cf. Kriss and Kriss-Heinrich (1960–62 and 1975).
[125]Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, 196.
[126]Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, 145.
[127]See Y.A. Petrosyan et al., *Pages of Perfection: Islamic Paintings and Calligraphy from the Russian Academy of Sciences, St. Petersburg* (Lugano: ARCH Foundation, 1995), pp. 224–225.
[128]See B. Brend, *Islamic Art* (London: British Museum Press, 1991), p. 193.
[129]Viré and Baer, *op. cit.*

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headdress, the royal fan and flywhisk seem to have entered Islam primarily via the imitation of Persian court ritual, though influences from the courts of Byzantium and India also probably played a role. Ultimately the question is perhaps less one to be framed in terms of influences than of shared practices with opaque and probably multiple points of origin and transmission over time. In different regional forms, the royal fan and flywhisk thus became important accoutrements and symbols of kingship throughout the Islamic world, including among the Muslim sultanates of East and West Africa and the courts of Central and South Asia.[130] Unsurprisingly, these influences also affected the religious minorities of the Muslim empires. The use of the royal fan was associated, for example, with the Jewish pseudo-messiah Sabbatai Sevi (d. 1676) during his processions in Ottoman Izmir. Like Muslim and Hindu religious leaders across the Indian Ocean, Sabbatai seems to have used the fan to doff the heads of selected devotees and so bless them.[131]

Like the ostrich egg, the use of peacock feathers and the iconography of the peacock more generally were also employed in a variety of architectural and artistic contexts in Islam. The association we have seen between peacocks and fabulous birds was particularly important in the visual arts of Islam, from where we have seen it transferred to the Christian world via trade in craft items.[132] This mythical association coalesced with the most important iconic associations of the peacock in Islam as a whole, which were with paradise. A divination book (*fālnāma*) painted by the seventeenth century Ottoman artist Kalender depicted a peacock accompanying Adam and Eve on their expulsion from paradise, as well as an image of the Greek physician Hippocrates flying on the back of the mythical *ʿanqā*.[133] These celestial associations were especially the case with regard to the iconography of the peacock's tail, the most famous manifestation of which was eventually in the portrayal of Burāq – the mysterious mount that carried Muḥammad on his mystical ascent through the heavens – as a horse with the tail of a peacock. This image appeared at least as early as the fourteenth century in paintings from Baghdad or Tabriz, and subsequently reached the heights of its popularity in Qājār Iran and in the popular art of Muslim South Asia. Peacock imagery was also popular in illustrations of poetic works, while the popularity of the peacock also resulted in the creation of numerous works of art and craft employing its imagery, from ceramic bowls to embroidered sashes, silk robes and bronze statues.[134] The most famous example of this was of course the peacock throne (*takht-e-ṭāwūs*) described by European visitors to the Mughal court of Shāh Jihān (1037–1068/1628–1657) and later reproduced by the nineteenth century

[130]It is Ibn Baṭṭūṭa again who provided descriptions of the royal flywhisks of Delhi and Central Asia. See Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, 171 and 196–197. On royal insignia at the Mughal court, see Abū l-Faḍl b. Mubārak, *Ayeen Akbery; or, The Institutes of the Emperor Akber*, trans. F. Gladwin, volumes I–III (London: G. Auld, 1800), I: 56–58; M.A. Ansari, "Court ceremonies of the Great Mughals", *Islamic Culture*, 35 (1961): 183–197.
[131]See J. Freely, *The Lost Messiah: In Search of Sabbatai Sevi* (London: Viking, 2001), pp. 89–90.
[132]See A. Daneshvari, "A preliminary study of the iconography of the peacock in Medieval Islam", in Hillenbrand. However, peacocks also formed a popular subject for painters in their own right and perhaps the most famous study of a peacock in Islamic art was that painted by the Mughal artist Manṣūr in 1610. See S.P. Verma, *Mughal Painter of Flora and Fauna Ustād Mansūr* (Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1999).
[133]See G.M. Meredith-Owens, *Turkish Miniatures* (London: British Museum Press, 1963), pp. 21–22.
[134]See Blair and Bloom, 108; Daneshvari.

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Qājār rulers of Iran.[135] In this context of prestige peacocks, it is perhaps unsurprising to find that one of the wives of the Qājār sultan Nāṣir al-Dīn Shāh (1264–1313/1848–1896) was called Ṭāwūs Khānum ('the peacock lady'). These courtly associations by no means exhausted the semantic range of the language of peacocks and in Persian the word for peacock (*ṭāwūs*) was found in numerous compounds and idioms, ranging from indicating a handsome man to metaphors of fire, the sun and the heavens, as well as providing a euphemism for the virgins of paradise (*ṭāwūs-e-khuld*).[136]

However, it was in the architecture of the mausoleum and its adjoining garden that the symbolism of the peacock was most fully elaborated and used to create a mirror of paradise on earth. The eleventh century mausoleum of the Ṣūfī saint Abū l-Ḥasan Kharaqānī (d. 426/1034) in northern Iran is the most important example known of wall paintings of peacocks in a burial context contributing to an overall recreation of paradise.[137] However, such imagery was more widespread, associating not only heaven with tombs but also with gardens in general.[138] The presence of live peacocks sometimes formed a living metaphor, whether in the gardens of the Mughal gentry or in such shrines as that at Kallakahar in the Salt Range of western Punjab. The late Mughal writer Āzād Bilgrāmī (d. 1201/1786) described peacocks wandering among the gardens and shrines of Khuldabad in the Indian Deccan.[139] This custom was later adopted from Indian gardens into the stately homes of England, the importing of living peacocks here reflecting the transmission of peacock imagery from the Islamic art of al-Andalus to that of Christian Spain and Italy five centuries earlier. In a more local reflection of the association of peacocks and gardens in India, peacocks were also often associated with the grounds of Hindu temples, particularly those connected to the god Skanda, for whom the bird was considered an emblem and celestial vehicle.[140]

Partly as a result of the local abundance of peacocks, it was also in India that the use of the peacock feather fan proliferated into the greatest number of courtly and religious contexts. Interestingly, it is in the South Asian ceremonial fan that the shape and form of the antique Perso-Mediterranean fan is best preserved. The office of the bearer of the royal peacock feather fan (Indo-Persian/Urdu *morchhal*) was one of great prestige and even into the twentieth century the right to stand holding it beside the throne continued to be an accolade granted only to representatives

[135]See C.E. Bosworth, "Takht-i Ṭāwūs", in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, volumes I–XI (Leiden: Brill, 1960–2000).

[136]See F. Steingass, *A Comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary* (London: W.H. Allen, 1892), p. 807.

[137]See A. Daneshvari, *Medieval Tomb Towers of Iran: An Iconographical Study* (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 1986).

[138]See W.A. Begley, "The garden of the Taj Mahal: A case study of Mughal architectural planning and symbolism", in *Mughal Gardens: Sources, Places, Representations and Prospects*, ed. J.L. Wescoat and J. Wolschke-Bulmahn (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library, 1996); A. Schimmel, "The Celestial Garden in Islam", in *The Islamic Garden*, ed. E.B. MacDougall and R. Ettinghausen (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks Colloquium on the History of Landscape Architecture, 1976).

[139]See Ghulām 'Alī Āzād Bilgrāmī, *Rawzat al-Awliyā* (Delhi: Libartī Ārt Prēs, 1416/1996), p. 64 [Persian].

[140]See S.S. Rana, *A Study of Skanda Cult* (Delhi: Nag Publishers, 1995). In the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, there is a bronze image of Skanda wearing a peacock feather crown from Swat dating from the first century BCE-CE.

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of the greatest families at courts such as that of the Niẓāms of Hyderabad.[141] As an indicator of the elevated rank of the person being fanned, *mōrchhals* featured in countless Mughal and Mughal-derived miniature paintings depicting local grandees. Here again the fans crossed between cultures, and during the age of the European nabobs, British merchants in India adopted the use of the *mōrchhal* along with other local practices. Fanning with *mōrchhals* was taken up by the British in India at least as early as the 1680s, when the Reverend John Ovington described how the unrelenting heat made him and his companions "employ our peons in fanning us with murchals made of peacock's feathers, four or five foot long, in the time of our entertainments and when we take our repose".[142] Such adoptions of local customs subsequently found their way into the European patronage of art in India, and a collection of small ivory figures from Murshidabad in Bengal bought by Lord Clive depicted a European nabob parading alongside an entourage bearing symbols of his status that included a standard, a lance and a *mōrchhal*.[143] Seen during Clive's trial in London as evidence of his megalomania, the figures were seized by customs on his return to England in 1767.

However, as with the ostrich eggs, the most prominent surviving location of peacock feathers in an Islamic milieu is at the shrines of the Muslim saints of South Asia. The shrine of a Muslim saint in this region is usually designated as a '[royal] court' (Persian/Urdu *dargāh*) and it is from this wider tradition of the religious adaptation of royal symbolism that the use of *mōrchhals* at the shrines of Muslim saints originally drew its meaning (Figure 14). The etiquette and symbolism of royal and religious spaces overlapped to the extent that eunuchs became the ceremonial guardians of the most sacred shrines of medieval Islam no less than the palaces of the sultans, a development reflected in the Christian world in the royal pageantry associated with the Vatican and Papal States. Luxury flywhisks were often fitted with silver handles and examples are extant of such finely-worked handles made for the courts of Muslim saints as well as kings. In this way, *mōrchhals* came to be found beside almost every Ṣūfī tomb in South Asia, while photographic evidence also points to the presence of flywhisks at shrines in Central Asia during the nineteenth century.[144] As in the Ottoman mausolea in which peacock feathers represented the burial of possessors of worldly dominion, in the saintly shrines of South Asia they served as a symbol for the presence of possessors of spiritual power. Here the function of the *mōrchhal* reflected that of the *flabella* displayed in Christian contexts, as symbols of spiritual authority that drew on the earlier usage of the royal court (Figure 15). The evidence of Indian miniature paintings shows that, like kings and courtiers, Ṣūfī masters were also

[141]The name *mōrchhal* is often regarded as a corruption of *mōr chihil* ('forty peacock [feathers]'), though the term developed independently of this popular etymology.

[142]John Ovington, *A Voyage to Suratt in the Year 1689* (London: n.p., 1696), p. 355.

[143]See M. Archer, C. Rowell and R. Skelton, *Treasures from India: The Clive Collection at Powis Castle* (London: Herbert Press, 1987), figure 113.

[144]On *morchhals* at South Asian Muslim shrines, see S. Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society, 1700–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 128–129. On other material items in ṣūfī shrine cults in South Asia, see S. Landell Mills "The hardware of sanctity: Anthropomorphic objects in Bangladeshi Sufism", in *Embodying Charisma: Modernity, Locality and the Performance of Emotion in Sufi Cults*, ed. P. Werbner & H. Basu (London: Routledge, 1998). Central Asian flywhisks may be seen beneath the hanging spheres/eggs in a photograph of a shrine kept in the Rau Collection, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (Rau Collection, 27.5).

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Figure 14. Indian Ṣūfī pilgrims carrying *mōrchhals*.

Figure 15. Indian court scene with *mōrchhal*.

whisked and fanned during their lifetimes by followers who carried such *mōrchhals*. Other South Asian Ṣūfīs carried the fans personally as an instrument for blessing or protecting their followers. In the late Mughal capital of Aurangabad, a *mōrchhal* was carried behind the Ṣūfī master Shāh Sa'īd Palangpōsh (d. 1111/1699) by members of his entourage.[145] An apotropaic element was also present here, for despite the

[145]Shāh Mahmūd Awrangābādī, *Malfūzāt-e-Naqshbandiyya: Hālāt-e-Hazrat Bābā Shāh Musāfir Sāhib* (Hyderabad: Nizāmat-e-'Umūr-e-Madhhabī-e-Sarkār-e-'Ālī, 1358/1939–40), p. 28 [Persian].

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peacock feather fan's associations with purity, we should also remember the peacock's reputation as a killer of serpents. Indeed, when Shāh Palangpōsh miraculously took on the shape of an animal to terrify intruders to his tent, his eyes were described as "full of blood like a peacock's".[146] In modern times, the combination of the visual attractiveness and rich symbolic qualities of the peacock have lent its image a variety of uses in South Asia in undertakings involving risk of one kind or another. Peacock feathers are thus often seen painted on Pakistani and Afghan trucks, generally as part of the apotropaic depiction of Burāq, the heavenly mount of Muḥammad.[147] Peacocks also still appear in the decoration of Pakistani wedding chariots.[148]

Just as material culture was able to infiltrate beyond religious boundaries in the Mediterranean, the same was no less true with regard to the use of the royal fan in South Asia. For the carrying of *mōrchhals* was a practice no less common to Hindu holy men and women, while Hindu cult images were also fanned by *mōrchhals*. Like the peacock flesh and ostrich bone talismans described by St Augustine (d. 430 AD), in India peacock feathers were similarly associated with a range of medicines and ritual cures among almost all religious and social groups, as well as being used as the apotropaic protectors of cattle.[149] In another example of the combined transit of objects and ritual practices, peacock feathers also played an important role in the self-consciously Muslim forms of magic carried out by traditional Hindu physicians in Gujarat.[150] A parallel adoption of the *mōrchhal*'s imagery is seen in the adoption of the yak hair flywhisk (*chamāra*, *chawrī*) of the Mughal court into Sikh practice, where the holy scripture itself is whisked by attendants to symbolise its authority in Sikh theology as the textual embodiment of the guru. Sikh coinage from the kingdom of Ranjit Singh showed Gūrū Nānak being fanned by a flywhisk.[151] Moving full circle, the peacock feather fan serves as an important ritual object among the long-established Indian Christian community in Kerala on the Indian Ocean littoral, where it is known as an *aala vattam*. In an Indian parallel to the association of the peacock feather and the host in the rituals of the Christian Mediterranean, the peacock also played a central role in the South Indian cult of St Thomas the Apostle, who in the legends associated with his shrine and cult was killed as a substitute for a peacock.[152] In a fitting reflection of the role of trade that we have seen in connecting religious cultures through the medium of material objects, it was Marco Polo who first introduced this legend to Europe.

[146]*Ibid*, 37.
[147]See J.-C. Blanc, *Afghan Trucks* (London: Mathews Miller Dunbar, 1976).
[148]See J.W. Frembgen, "Wedding chariots from Pakistan: An example of modern folk art", *Münchner Beiträger zur Völkerkunder*, 8 (2003): 249 and Figure 1.
[149]See W. Crooke, *The Popular Religion and Folklore of Northern India*, volumes I–II (Westminster: A. Constable, 1896), II: 45, 233 and 250.
[150]See D. Daya, *Bhut Nibandh: An Essay Descriptive of the Demonology and Other Popular Superstitions of Guzerat, being the Prize Essay of the Guzerat Vernacular Society*, trans. A.K. Forbes (Bombay: n.p., 1849), pp. 57–58.
[151]See M. Kaur, "A study of Sikh numismatics with special reference to coins of Maharaja Ranjit Singh", in *Maharaja Ranjit Singh: Political, Society and Economy*, ed. F. Singh and A.C. Arora (Patiala: Panjabi University, 1984), p. 331.
[152]See Marco Polo, *The Travels of Marco Polo* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1939), pp. 364–365. The story is still current in South India, where the role of the peacock is also related to the etymology of the location of St Thomas's Mount at Mailapur.

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Conclusions

In both Christian and Islamic contexts, we have seen ostrich eggs and peacock feathers associated with sacred and/or burial spaces, and by extension with paradise, eternal life and the celestial domain of birds in general. The universal association of the egg with (re)birth also clearly functioned within this symbolic framework. Like other natural objects found in shrines associated with more than one faith tradition, these avian objects point to an object-based and so expressly non-theological level of shared cultural practice. While at times we have seen written attempts by medieval scholars to theologise these objects, the widespread and longstanding use of the eggs and feathers makes it likely that in such cases theology was the servant of pre-existing practice. We have also seen attempts to resist the practices associated with these objects, and so reinforce the religious boundaries that they repeatedly crossed. In medieval Cairo, Ibn Taymiyya denounced the painting of eggs as Christian and in the tradition of the Ethiopian St George the egg was condemned as a Muslim import, and yet ostrich eggs remained popular cult items in Muslim Egypt and Christian Ethiopia alike. It is clear, then, that such objects functioned overwhelmingly within the material realm of religious practice rather than within the more abstract realm of theology, even if the latter at times resisted or accommodated the former.

Given the very different societies in which ostrich eggs and peacock feathers appeared, it is clearly impossible to draw overall conclusions about what they reveal. Put into their proper and distinct contexts, each egg or feather can surely tell us something different about its own place and time. The drawing of general conclusions is also made difficult by the contrasting financial value of the objects in different regions; what were luxury items in Europe were considerably less costly nearer to their place of origin. But if we may confine ourselves to the religiously plural societies of the southern and eastern Mediterranean and of the Indian Ocean world, where the use of the eggs and feathers were in any case more prevalent, we may hazard certain conclusions. These general conclusions centre upon the ways in which such objects aided in the mutual intelligibility of sacred spaces shared by Muslims, Christians and, in a South Asian context, Hindus and Sikhs. For structured around such symbolic objects and the cultic practices that accompanied them was a mutually intelligible sense of the sacred that has long underwritten the presence of Muslims in the Christian shrines of the eastern Mediterranean no less than the presence of Hindus in the Muslim shrines of India. As visual clues of a mutually intelligible symbolic order, in the religiously plural societies of the southern Mediterranean and Indian Ocean the usage of the common objects we have traced served to underwrite premodern forms of everyday cosmopolitanism as manifested in popular religious custom.

Like the use of the headscarf that was until recently a cultural practice common in differing degree to most parts of the Mediterranean, the history of the objects we have traced forms part of a shared sphere of cultural practice that has also encompassed aspects of diet, dress, popular belief and lifestyle more generally. It is ultimately impossible to ascribe a single place or people to which such practices 'belong' more than others, for they belong rather to cycles of recurrent influences within given geo-cultural regions, whether in the Mediterranean or Indian Ocean worlds. By looking at the map of the Mediterranean without inscribing an impenetrable cultural borderline across its centre, we can get some sense of the

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ways in which the exchange of objects was able to subvert boundaries of regional, religious or political affiliation. For in complex trading regions, objects move almost irresistibly, bringing with them their associated practices as part of a package against which theology or other forms of ideology can only resist so far or else accommodate. "Popular" religion is in this sense the aggregate of the inherited and acquired cultural property (objects, rituals, places) of a given region without the secondary (theological, ideological) impulse to exclude what does not 'belong'. In the spirit of Lévi-Strauss's *bricolage*, what is there belongs there. From this perspective, the diverse forms of cultural practice and exchange seen in the presence of ostrich eggs and peacock feathers in so many cultural contexts reveal some of the leaks in the hull of historical models characterised by the drawing of impermeable cultural boundaries. As the ostrich eggs and peacock feathers silently yet eloquently show, such leaks in the hull of history spring from various points of the social spectrum, from the luxury trade of the wealthy to the cultural inheritance of the peasant.